

# Ilya Ehrenbourg

## PEOPLE and TIME

first volume of autobiography



## PEOPLE AND LIFE

*By the same author*

★

THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF  
JULIO JURENITO

THE LOVE OF JEANNE NEY

A STREET IN MOSCOW

THE FALL OF PARIS

RUSSIA AT WAR

EUROPEAN CROSS-ROAD

THE STORM

THE NINTH WAVE

THE THAW

THE SPRING





Ilya Ehrenburg, by Pablo Picasso

ILYA EHRENBURG



# People and Life

Memoirs of 1891-1917

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*and*

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## PEOPLE AND LIFE

**NOTE:** All footnotes are by the translators.

# I

I HAVE long wanted to write about some of the people I have met during my life, some of the events I have participated in or seen; but more than once I have put off the task: either circumstances were against it or I was overcome by doubts whether I could re-create the image of a man, a picture faded with the years, whether I could rely on my memory. Now I am going to write the book nevertheless: it cannot be put off any longer.

Thirty-five years ago I wrote in one of my travel sketches: 'This summer at Abramtsevo I looked at the beeches in the garden and at the deep armchairs. Now Aksakov, he had time to think about things. His correspondence with Gogol is an unhurried inventory of his soul and his times. But what of us? What shall we leave behind us when we go? Receipts: "Received with thanks, 100 roubles (one hundred roubles)." We have neither beeches nor armchairs, and we snatch our moments of rest from the devastating turmoil of editorial offices and lobbies, travelling in railway compartments or on board ship. This, I suppose, carries its own truth. Time has now acquired a high-powered motor. And you can't call out to a motor-car "Stop, I want to take a better look at you!" All you can do is to describe the fugitive brightness of its lights. Or—and that's another way out—you can find yourself under its wheels.'

Many of my contemporaries have found themselves under the wheels of time. I have survived—not because I was stronger or more far-seeing but because there are times when the fate of a man is not like a game of chess played according to rule but like a lottery.

I was right when I said a very long time ago that our age would leave few living documents behind it: it was rare for anyone to keep a diary, letters were short and businesslike—'I'm alive and well'—and few memoirs were written. There are many reasons for this. Let me mention just one, not perhaps recognized by everybody: we were too often at loggerheads with our own past to give it proper thought. Within the half-century, our ideas on people and events have changed

many times; conversations were broken off in mid-sentence; thoughts and feelings could not but be affected by circumstances. The way of each and everyone led across virgin soil; people fell down precipices, slipped, clung to splintering branches of dead wood. Forgetfulness was sometimes dictated by a sense of self-preservation: one could not go forward with memories of the past—they chained one's legs. As a child I heard the saying 'those who remember everything have a hard life'; later I found out for myself that the age was too difficult for anyone to carry a load of memories. Even events that shook the nations such as the two world wars, quickly became transformed into history. Publishers in all countries are saying today: 'War books aren't selling . . .' Some no longer remember, others do not want to learn about the past. Everyone looks forward, and that is a good thing, of course; but it was not for nothing that the Romans made a god of Janus. Janus had two faces, not because he was 'two-faced' as it is often said, but because he was wise: one of his faces was turned towards the past, the other towards the future. The temple of Janus was closed only during years of peace, and over the space of a thousand years this happened only nine times—peace was an event of the utmost rarity in Rome. My generation was not like the Romans, but we, too, can count the more or less peaceful years on the fingers of our hands. Unlike the Romans, however, we seem to believe that the past should be thought about only in times of profound peace.

When eye-witnesses are silent, legends are born. We sometimes talk of 'storming the Bastille', although in fact no one stormed the Bastille—14th July 1789 was only another episode in the French Revolution; the people of Paris easily penetrated into the prison, where they found very few prisoners. Yet it is precisely the taking of the Bastille that became the national day of the Revolution.

The images of writers which have come down to later generations are formalised and sometimes directly contrary to the truth. Until a short time ago Stendhal appeared to his readers as an egotist, i.e. a man absorbed in his own feelings and experiences, although in fact he was a sociable man and detested selfishness. It is generally accepted that Turgenev loved France—after all, he spent much of his life there, he was a friend of Flaubert's; but in reality he did not understand the French and rather disliked them. Some regard Zola as someone who was a stranger to no temptation, the author of *Nana*; others, remembering his role in the defence of Dreyfus, see him as a public figure, a

passionate tribune; whereas in fact the stout paterfamilias was chaste as few men are and, with the exception of the last few years of his life, lived far from the social storms that shook France.

Whenever I drive down Gorky Street I see a bronze man, looking extremely arrogant, and each time I am deeply surprised that this is a monument to Mayakovsky, so little does the statue resemble the man I knew.

In the past, legendary images took shape over the space of decades, sometimes centuries; today it is not only aircraft that swiftly cross the oceans, not only people who leave the earth in a matter of seconds and forget the multi-coloured complexity of its reliefs. It sometimes seems to me that the dimming of literature, a phenomenon observed almost everywhere in the second half of our century, is connected with the speed with which yesterday is transformed into a convention. It is very rare for a writer to represent people who really exist—a certain Ivanov, Durand or Smith; the heroes of novels are an alloy made up of a multitude of people the author has met, his own inner experiences, his understanding of the world. Is history, perhaps, a novelist? Perhaps living people are her prototypes and, smelting them all down, she is writing novels, good or bad.

We all know how contradictory are the reports of eye-witnesses of a particular event. In the last analysis, however conscientious the witnesses, the judges have to rely on their own insight. Authors of memoirs, though they claim that they are giving an impartial account of an era, nearly always describe themselves. If we believed the image of Stendhal created by Mérimée, his closest friend, we should never be able to understand how that man of the world, witty and egocentric, could have described great human passions: luckily Stendhal left us his diaries. The political storm which broke in Paris on 15th May 1848 has been described by Victor Hugo, Herzen and Turgenev; when I read their accounts I have the impression they are speaking about different events.

Sometimes the contradictoriness of reports is due to differences of feeling and thought, sometimes to plain lapses of memory. Ten years after Chekhov's death people who had known him well were arguing about the colour of his eyes—had they been brown, grey or blue?

Memory retains some things and discards others. I remember every detail of some pictures from my childhood and adolescence,

by no means the most important ones; I remember some people and have totally forgotten others. Memory is like the headlights of a car at night, which fall now on a tree, now on a hut, now on a man. People (usually writers) who tell the story of their lives as a continuous and detailed whole usually fill in the gaps with conjecture; it is hard to tell where genuine reminiscence ends and the novel begins.

I do not propose to give a consecutive account of the past: I have a distaste for mingling what really happened with fiction; besides, I have written many novels in which my personal memories served as material for various inventions. I want to speak about particular people, particular years, linking memory with my own thoughts about the past. I suppose it will be a book about myself rather than about an epoch. Of course I shall speak about many people I have known—politicians, writers, artists, dreamers, adventurers; the names of some of them are known to all; but I am not an impartial chronicler, and these will only be attempts at portraits. I shall not even try to describe events in their chronological sequence, but in their relation to my own small fate, my thoughts of today.

I have never kept a diary. My life has on the whole been a restless one, and I have never managed to keep the letters of my friends—I had to burn hundreds of letters when the fascists occupied Paris, and later, too, letters tended to be destroyed rather than preserved. In 1936 I wrote a novel called *A Book for Adults*<sup>1</sup>; it differs from my other novels in that it contains chapters which are in the nature of memoirs. I shall borrow a few things from that old book.

I think it would be premature to publish certain chapters because they deal with people who are still living or events which do not yet belong to history. I shall try to distort nothing consciously—to forget the novelist's trade.

Stone is always cold, it differs by its very nature from the human body, but since immemorial times sculptors have taken marble, granite or a metal—bronze—to represent man. They resorted to wood only for decorative works, although wood is, of course, much nearer to flesh. Stone attracts because it is a difficult material to work; besides, it is enduring. Long rows of stone statues confront us in the museums, some beautiful, all cold. But sometimes a statue acquires warmth, comes

<sup>1</sup> 'Kniga dlya Vzroslykh'.

alive, through the eye of the beholder. I should like to bring to life some petrifications of the past with loving eyes—and also to come nearer to the reader; all books are confessions, and a book of memoirs is a confession without any attempt to cloak oneself in the shadow of invented heroes.

## 2

I WAS born in Kiev on 14th January 1891. 1891 is a date well remembered by the Russian people and the French wine-growers. In Russia there was famine; twenty-nine provinces were hit by a bad harvest. Tolstoy, Chekhov and Korolenko did their best to help the famine-stricken, collected money, set up soup-kitchens; all this was but a drop in the ocean, and for many years afterwards '91 was called the 'hungry year'. The French wine-growers grew rich on that year's wines: a drought parches the corn but improves the quality of grapes; dark years for the Volga region peasants invariably coincide with happy years for the wine-growers of Burgundy and Gascony; as late as the twenties of this century connoisseurs looked out for wines marked '1891'. In 1943 a truck of 1891 Saint-Emilion was taken along the 'ice road' from Leningrad to Moscow. *Samtrest*<sup>1</sup> asked Alexey Tolstoy and myself to test the quality of the rescued wine. In the old bottles we found a sour-tasting water; the wine had died (contrary to a widespread belief, even the best wines die at the age of forty-five or fifty).

1891 . . . How long ago it seems today! Russia was ruled by Alexander III. The British throne was occupied by Queen Victoria, who well remembered the siege of Sebastopol, the speeches of Gladstone, the 'pacification' of India. Franz-Josef, who had come to the throne in the memorable year 1848, was comfortably installed in Vienna. The heroes of the dramas and farces of the nineteenth century were still alive—Bismarck, General Galliffet, Ignatyev the well-known diplomat of Tsarist Russia, Marshal MacMahon, Vogt whom our students know through Karl Marx's pamphlet. Engels was still living. Pasteur and Sechenov, Maupassant and Verlaine, Tchaikovsky and Verdi, Whitman and Louise Michel were still working. Goncharov died in 1891.

Externally, if we imagine 1891 today, the world has changed so much that it is as though not just one human life but several centuries

<sup>1</sup> The Georgian wine-making organisation.

had run their course. Paris made do without neon lights and cars. Moscow was called 'a large village'. The romantics, enamoured of linden trees and Schubert, were ending their days in Germany. America was oceans away.

Neither Joliot-Curie nor Fermi, Mayakovsky nor Eluard were yet born. Hitler was two years old. Outwardly the world seemed calm: no one was at war; Italy was merely taking a preliminary look at Ethiopia, France was preparing to seize Madagascar. The papers discussed the visit of the French fleet to Kronstadt; a Franco-Russian alliance would, it seemed, be created to counterbalance the Tripartite Alliance; amateurs of high politics were saying 'the balance of power in Europe will save the peace'.

Russia was still immobile. Alexander III, having smashed the Narodnaya Volya<sup>1</sup>, had more or less calmed down. True, a small demonstration had been held in Petersburg on May Day. True, Lenin was reading Marx in Samara. But why should this cause the slightest anxiety to the all-powerful Tsar? Without a flicker he saluted when, during the visit of the French fleet, the band played the *Marseillaise*. He said complacently: they've started work on the Great Siberian Railway, soon one will be able to go from Irkutsk to Moscow by train...

May Day was a novelty. At Fourmies, an industrial commune in Northern France, police fired on a May Day demonstration. The newspapers wrote: 'The sinister shades of the Communards are coming back to life'.

The Pan-German Alliance was solemnly founded in Germany. There was much talk of *Lebensraum*, Germany's mission, future campaigns, and the fathers of future SS men shouted '*Hoch*'.

Jaurès was writing that the victory would belong, not to the executioners of Fourmies, but to the workers, the Internationalists, the defenders of the rights of man.

No, 1891 is not so long ago after all: the broth which my generation has been supping ever since was just coming to the boil. Every individual life is complex and circuitous, but when you take a bird's-eye view of it you see that it follows an invisible straight line. Men born in 1891, that most peaceful of years, when there was famine in Russia and

<sup>1</sup> 'People's Will', the leading revolutionary organisation (1879-1887) which used terrorist methods.

wonderful wine in France, were to see many revolutions, many wars, October, the sputnik, Verdun, Stalingrad, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Einstein, Picasso, Chaplin.

On 14th January 1891, on the day when, in Kiev, in steep Institut-skaya Street that leads upwards to Lipky from Kreshchatik, I was to see the light of day, Chekhov, then in Petersburg, wrote to his sister: 'I am surrounded by a dense atmosphere of ill-will, extremely hazy and quite incomprehensible to me. They give me dinners and sing tasteless eulogies in my honour and at the same time they are ready to eat me alive. What for? The devil only knows. If I were to shoot myself, I should give intense pleasure to nine-tenths of my friends and admirers. And how pettily they express their petty feelings! Burenin attacks me in an article, although it is nowhere customary for a paper to attack its own contributors . . .' What was Burenin saying about Chekhov? 'Mediocre talents of this kind lose the ability to look straight at the life around them and flee to wherever their feet will carry them . . .' In January 1891 Chekhov began his long story *The Duel*. I often re-read Chekhov and recently I again re-read *The Duel*. Of course it bears the marks of time. The hero, Layevsky, sick to death of life in the provinces, dreams of returning to Petersburg: 'People in the train talk about trade, new singers, Franco-Russian sympathies; everywhere you sense a vital, cultured, intelligent, vigorous life . . .' But I don't need *The Duel* to tell me about the Franco-Russian *rapprochement* or the development of trade. When I re-read the story I think about something else: my own life.

Layevsky is a weak man who has got himself into a mess and is near despair: 'He had cast his own dim star out of the sky, it had sunk and its traces were swallowed up by the night's darkness; it would never return to the sky because life comes only once and is not repeated. If it had been possible to bring back the days and years, he would have replaced the falsehood in them by truth, idleness by work, boredom by joy . . .' The lost soul Layevsky is exposed by von Koren, a man of the exact sciences and of very inexact conscience. 'As he is incorrigible, he can be rendered harmless by one means only . . . In the interests of mankind and in their own interest, such people should be subject to extermination. They must be! I don't insist on capital punishment. If it has been proved that this is harmful, then invent something else. If it's impossible to exterminate Layevsky, then isolate him, obliterate his personality, conscript him for public works . . . And if he shows pride

and starts resisting, into irons with him! . . . We must take steps ourselves to exterminate the sick and useless; otherwise, when the Layevskys multiply, civilization will perish.' And here is what the poor devil Layevsky thinks about the merciless champion of progress and natural selection: 'Even his ideals are despotic. Ordinary mortals who work for the common good, they have their neighbour in mind—you, me, in short, the human being. But for von Koren human beings are puppies, nonentities, too trivial to form the goal of his life. He works, he'll join an expedition and break his neck out there, not for the sake of love of his neighbour but in the name of such abstractions as the human race, future generations, an ideal breed of men . . . And what is the human race? An illusion, a mirage . . . despots have always been illusion-hunters.'

At the end of the story Layevsky, and Chekhov with him, think as they watch a stormy sea: 'The boat is hurled back, it makes two steps forward and one back, but the oarsmen are stubborn, they ply their oars tirelessly and are not afraid of the high waves. The boat continues to go forward, now you can no longer see it, in another half hour or so the oarsmen will see the lights of the ship and within an hour they'll be by the ship's ladder. So it is in life . . . In the search for truth men make two steps forward, one step back. Sufferings, mistakes and the tedium of life throw them back, but the desire for truth and a stubborn will drive them forwards. And who knows? Perhaps their boat will sail to the real truth.'

As I have already said, Chekhov began *The Duel* in January 1891. Looking back on my life I see that there is a link between my thoughts, hopes, doubts and the things that moved Chekhov when I was not yet born. I have met some von Korens in my lifetime, I have often made mistakes and lost my way, and, like Layevsky, I have grieved for my own dim star which I had cast out of the sky; like Layevsky again, I have admired the oarsmen battling against the high waves. Today, far continents have become a suburb. Even the moon has somehow come nearer. But for all that the past has not lost its power, and if within a lifetime a man changes his skin an infinite number of times—almost as often as his suits—still he does not change his heart: he has but one.

### 3

THEY say 'an apple doesn't fall far from the tree'. Sometimes that's really so, sometimes it's the other way about. I've lived in an age when a man was often judged on the basis of a questionnaire; in the newspapers they wrote that 'a son is not responsible for his father', but occasionally one was held responsible even for granddad.

Similarly, it's hardly fair to judge a grandfather by his grandchildren. A few years ago I read an article in *Le Monde* about Tolstoy's grandchildren and great-grandchildren; there are about eighty of them and they are scattered all over the world; one is an officer in the American army, another is an Italian tenor, a third works for a French airline.

Besides writing good verse the poet Fet—Afanasy Afanasyevich Shenshin—wrote not-so-good articles for Katkov's journal. He attacked the Nihilists and the Jews, in whom he saw the original source of evil. Fet's nephew, N. P. Puzin, once told me that shortly before his death the poet learnt from a letter—his late mother's testament—that his father had been a Jew from Hamburg. I was told that Fet stipulated that the letter should be buried with him; he evidently wanted to conceal from posterity the truth about his apple tree. After the revolution someone opened the grave and found the letter.

Turgenev used to recall: 'I was born and grew up in an atmosphere of slaps, clouts, kicks, beatings, etc., but, truth to tell, these surroundings never gave me a taste for fisticuffs. I have never beaten anyone.' Turgenev turned his Russian daughter Pelageya into a French Pauline, married her to M. Gaston Bruère, owner of a glass factory, and wrote to Annenkov: 'I have had to go to an infinite amount of trouble, but I have been rewarded; I am fully convinced that my daughter will be happy.' (Turgenev then began to write *Smoke*, where he describes the sufferings of a married woman.)

I remember my parents with affection; but, as I look back, I see how far the apple has rolled from the tree.

I was born into a bourgeois Jewish family. My mother cherished many traditions: she had grown up in a devout family, where they feared both the God whose name could not be uttered and those 'gods'

which had to be offered plentiful sacrifices in order that they should not demand blood. She never forgot either the Day of Judgment in heaven or the pogroms on earth. My father belonged to the first generation of Russian Jews who had broken out of the ghetto. My grandfather had cursed him because he had gone to study in a Russian school. My grandfather, I may add, was altogether a hot-tempered man; he cursed all his children in turn, but as he grew old he understood that the times were against him and made it up with the cursed ones.

Assuming that my grandfather was the apple tree, the apples bounced away from that tree, too, in all conceivable directions. One of my uncles became a rich man; he was called Lazar Grigoryevich and lived in Kharkov. His son, my first cousin, became a Social Democrat, was held for a long time in Lukyanovsk prison, emigrated to Paris, took up painting there, and during the Civil War joined the Red Army and was killed by the Whites. Lazar's brother, Boris Grigoryevich, lived in Irkutsk and worked in some enterprise belonging to a wealthy Kiev man called Brodsky. Boris Grigoryevich was an irresponsible character; he defrauded Brodsky and fled to America, having written his employer a letter which was defiant rather than contrite. Brodsky, enraged, put an advertisement in the newspapers offering a reward to anyone who helped to trace the embezzler. I was in Paris at the time and was approached more than once by people hoping to get rich by tracking down the fugitive Ehrenburg. On one occasion Lazar Grigoryevich was playing cards with Brodsky; he won a large sum of money and instead of pocketing it he insisted that Brodsky should drop all claims upon his Irkutsk employee. The youngest of my uncles, Lev, wrote poetry and ran a travelling circus. If Shklovsky's theory that the line of heredity passes to nephews rather than sons were applied, not to literary genres, but to people, I could say that I have followed in the footsteps of my uncle Lev. I remember a book which he published himself—it had an unoriginal title, *Dreams and Sounds*—containing poems of his own and translations from Heine. At that time I was not in the least attracted to poetry, but I liked Uncle Lyova because he was so unlike a proper relative. Once he started showing me photographs of half-naked equestriennes—he was taking on new artistes for his circus; my mother was outraged: how can you corrupt a child? On another occasion posters advertising 'Ehrenburg's Circus' appeared in Kharkov, and Lazar Grigoryevich was obliged to pay his brother damages to get the circus to leave town at once.

When I was five years old my parents moved from Kiev to Moscow. The Khamovniki brewery nominally belonged to a company of shareholders, but in fact it was the property of the same Brodsky from Kiev, and my father was given the job of brewery manager.

That was in 1896, and in 1903 Brodsky decided to sack him. My mother, swallowing her tears, listened at the closed door of the study where the annual board meeting was taking place as my father pleaded to be relieved of his post. I listened too and couldn't understand anything; I knew that my father was being sacked, that business was bad, that Brodsky was an obstinate devil, and suddenly I heard my father insist that he could no longer work at the brewery. That was my first lesson in diplomacy.

In the daytime my father worked, in the evenings he was rarely at home. Sometimes his friends would come to see him; I remember one of them called Likhachev, a good-natured engineer. Once in my father's study I saw a book by Gilyarovsky with a dedication—'To dear Gri Gri in memory of many things'. It seemed to me that my father had an interesting life and that he was excluding me from it. He used to go to the 'Hunting Club'; the name struck me as mysterious—huntsmen, stags, borzois. Later I realised that at the club they played whist and I began to doubt the interesting nature of my father's life. I was about ten when he took me to a restaurant on Neglinny; we had a private dining-room but I kept running out to see what was going on in the main room; it was full of commonplace people chewing beef. My father's life ceased to interest me.

My mother was kindly, delicate, superstitious; she had lung trouble, was always wrapped up in shawls, rarely left the house and wrote long letters in Yiddish to her numerous relations. On the Day of Atonement she fasted. I used to be frightened by the large candle which she lit in the morning on the anniversary of her mother-in-law's death. The bedroom always smelt of medicines; doctors came frequently. My mother wanted them to examine me as well—I had weak lungs—but I would run away and hide. Sometimes an overdressed lady called Mrs Familant would come to see my mother with her sons Petya and Misha; they ate pastries in a well-behaved manner and, when asked to by the grown-ups, recited verses by Pushkin. I thought they were stupid, but my mother said 'Look at Petya and Misha, they're good children. But you?'

I was very spoilt and, it seems, it was only by chance that I did not

become a juvenile delinquent. I was nine years old when my mother went to Bad Ems for a cure, sending me and my sisters to her father's house in Kiev.

My maternal grandfather was a venerable old man with a big silvery beard. All religious customs were strictly observed in his house. On Saturday you had to rest, and this meant that the grown-ups could not smoke or the children play. (The Jewish Saturday is as dismal as the English Puritan Sunday.) At my grandfather's I was always bored and got up to as much mischief as I could. That summer we spent in a *dacha* at Boyarka. I drove everybody to distraction; once they decided to punish me by locking me in the coal shed. I stripped naked and started rolling on the floor. When the door was opened, the terrified kitchenmaid cried, 'If it isn't the devil!' I decided to get my own back, fetched a bottle of paraffin in the middle of the night and tried to set fire to the *dacha*.

The following summer my mother took me to Bad Ems with her. I infuriated everyone: I teased the ancient Count Orlov-Davydov by calling him 'Mum' because he was always mumbling; interfered with an Englishwoman's fishing by throwing pebbles at the fish; filched the bunches of forget-me-nots which the Germans laid at the foot of the 'Old Kaiser's' monument. The resort authorities asked my mother to leave if she was unable to control me.

I passed the entrance examination to the preparatory class brilliantly, then that to the first class of the gymnasium; I knew that there was a *numerus clausus*<sup>1</sup> and that I should be accepted only if I got top marks in all subjects. I solved the arithmetic problem, didn't make a single mistake in the dictation and recited with feeling: 'Late Autumn. The starlings have flown . . .'

A friend once told me—this was in the early thirties—how his small son, coming home from school where he had just started going, had asked him 'What are Jews?' 'I'm a Jew,' his father had answered, 'Mummy's a Jewess'. This was so unexpected that the little boy didn't believe it: 'You? A Je-oooo?' We were better informed than that; at the age of eight I was well aware that there were such things as a Jewish Pale, residence permits, place quotas and pogroms.

I was brought up in Moscow and played with Russian children. When my parents wanted to conceal something from me they would

<sup>1</sup> Maximum quota of places for Jewish pupils.

say it in Yiddish. I never prayed to any God, either Jewish or Russian. My reaction to the word 'Jew' was a peculiar one: I belong to those whom it is proper to persecute. This seemed to me unjust and at the same time natural. My father, an unbeliever, used to blame those Jews who embraced the Russian Orthodox faith to make their lot easier, and from an early age I understood that one must not be ashamed of one's origins. Somewhere I read that the Jews had crucified Christ; Uncle Lyova said that Christ had been a Jew; my nurse Vera Platonovna told me that Christ used to teach that if a man smites you on one cheek, you must turn the other. This went against the grain. When I went to school for the first time, some little boy started singing, 'Jew boy, Jew boy sat on a wall, Jew boy, Jew boy had a great fall'. Without stopping to think I hit him in the face. Soon we made friends. No one insulted me again.

In my form there were three Jews: Zeldovich, Pukerman and myself; we never felt that we were outsiders. But our classmates envied us when we hung about in the courtyard during scripture lessons.

In the Moscow of my childhood I never met with antisemitism. No doubt there were some among my teachers or my classmates' parents who had been infected by racial prejudice, but they did not give themselves away; at that time the intelligentsia shunned antisemitism as a shameful disease. I remember stories of the Kishinev pogrom. I was then twelve years old; I understood that something terrible had happened, but I knew that those responsible were the Tsar, the Governor, the police; I already knew that all decent people were against the autocracy; I knew that Tolstoy, Chekhov, Korolenko were outraged by the pogrom. When I went to Kiev I heard that the paper *Kievlyanin* was advocating massacre, that there was unrest on the Podol, that there was such a thing as the 'damned Jewish question'.

It was a queer time: so much filth and so many illusions! The fate of one unjustly condemned French officer roused the finest people in Europe. 'If you don't acquire a higher education you won't be able to live in Moscow,' my father used to say, looking at the bad marks in my report. I would only grin: by the time I had finished at the gymnasium, the whole world would have changed. It seemed to me that the articles in *Kievlyanin* and *Moskovskiye Vedomosti*<sup>1</sup> were the last echoes of a medieval fanaticism; I could never have imagined that in a book about

<sup>1</sup> 'Moscow Bulletin'.

Q. 16.80



my past I should have to devote many bitter pages to a question which, at the beginning of the century, seemed to mean archaism doomed to death.

Meanwhile, my father was furious about the bad marks. During my first two years at school I did well, then I got bored with problems about filling and emptying tanks. I would quietly carry away my parents' sumptuously bound editions of the classics and sell them to the second-hand booksellers on Volkhonka; then I would spend the proceeds at the joke shop in Stoleshnikov Lane on sneezing powder, itching powder, squibs and little boxes with rubber mice or snakes jumping out of them, just to rag the masters.

Even before I had entered the preparatory class at school I had recited Lermontov's *Demon*. A poet's fame did not tempt me. I did not want to be Lermontov but the Demon, I wanted to soar high above Khamovniki; I called myself 'spirit of exile', without, of course, understanding what it meant. Soon I got tired of poetry and fell in love with chemistry, botany and zoology, sat over the microscope, made experiments with stinking powders, kept frogs, lizards and newts. Once the creatures escaped and ran all over the flat; no one knew where the stench was coming from; it was the principal newt rotting underneath my mother's wardrobe.

Having heard many tales about the heroism of the Boers, I first wrote a letter to bearded President Kruger and then, stealing ten roubles from my mother, set out for the theatre of operations. They caught me at night and I did not like to look back upon the ill-starred venture.

Changes in calendar dates are always exciting, and now it wasn't merely a new year that was beginning but a new century. (In reality the nineteenth century lasted longer than its apportioned share of time—it began in 1789 and ended in 1914.) Everyone talked about the 'end of an age', and speculated on what the new one would be like. I remember New Year's Night, 1901. A crowd of people in fancy dress and masks came to our house. One wore Chinese costume; I recognized Gil, the good-natured engineer, and grabbed him by the pigtail. The masqueraders represented the countries of Europe, the Hungarian danced a czardas, the Spanish woman clicked her castanets, and all of them whirled round the Chinese: there was fighting in Peking that winter. All of them, too, drank to the 'new age'; I don't suppose that anyone guessed what that age would be like and what precisely it was they drank to among the snowdrifts of Moscow.

I was then a pupil in the Parallel Second form of the First Gymnasium. I remember organizing a small group of 'Boxers'—that was what they called the Chinese rebels. We fought with our school belts and made effective use of the brass buckles, although our gentlemen's agreement did not permit it: the twentieth century was beginning.

I was getting entirely out of hand; my tricks were becoming intolerable. My father was never at home, and my mother and sisters could not cope with me. They used to call on the aid of the house-porter, whose name was Ilya like my own and who used to stoke our boilers. Once I went for Ilya with a pocket-knife; he was rather frightened of me.

And then someone turned up who did know how to control me. This was a law student called Mikhail Yakovlevich Imkhanitsky. Everyone was surprised that I obeyed him, for he never punished me. Mikhail Yakovlevich came to live in our house. I used to do my homework in his presence, and when I got the right answer to a compound interest problem he would give me toffees: I had a sweet tooth. I used to throw the wrapping papers on the floor; sometimes he would ask, 'What's happened to the papers?' I would look at the floor—there weren't any papers. Mikhail Yakovlevich would laugh quietly to himself. I told no one about the mysterious toffees. I was afraid of Mikhail Yakovlevich's eyes; when he looked at me, I quickly turned away. My parents thought him an excellent pedagogue.

During the summer a friend of one of my sisters, Lyolya Golovinskaya, stayed with us at our *dacha* in Sokolniki. She caught Mikhail Yakovlevich's fancy. At that time, talk about hypnotism was much in vogue. The law student declared that he had hypnotic powers; he put Lyolya to sleep and told her that she must come to his room at the *dacha* late at night three days later. The family was indignant. Mikhail Yakovlevich calmly packed his suitcase and explained that he had been hypnotising me, thus ensuring everybody's peace and quiet for a full eighteen months.

I was taken to see Professor Rybakov: someone had told my mother that I might lose my will power for good. A few years later, seeing Mikhail Yakovlevich on Prechistensky Boulevard, I ran for dear life. Years passed. In 1917, returning home from Paris, I saw a short fat man at the Russian consulate in Stockholm. He said to me: 'Don't you recognise me? Imkhanitsky'. I was surprised: he had completely ordinary, even expressionless eyes.

But I often remembered the non-existent toffees. I believe that more than once in later life I was made to solve difficult problems and was rewarded with toffees that weren't really there. Only no one gave me bromide salts to drink afterwards and no one was afraid that I might lose my will power. Will power, I daresay, had become an encumbrance.

Life at home was boring. Visitors came and said that the Kristman sisters had wonderful coloratura voices, that the lawyer Labori had made a superb speech in defence of the innocent Dreyfus, that a restaurant with private rooms in the Mauretanian style had been opened in Moscow, that a certain Madame Malbranche had brought new models of hats from Paris. They also talked about the first night of a Sudermann comedy, about the opening of the Art Theatre with seats at popular prices, about the pogroms, Tolstoy's letter, the eloquence of the barrister Plevako who could obtain the acquittal of the cruellest murderer, Doroshevich's articles making fun of the 'city fathers', and the crazy Decadents, who claimed that there was such a thing as 'pale feet'.

The brewery yard seemed to me far more interesting than the drawing-room, where dusty palms in wooden tubs stood in corners and a copy of a painting representing Lomonosov on his way to study in Moscow hung on the wall. You could go to the stables—the smell was wonderful and I knew the character of every horse. You could hide in the forty-gallon barrels. In one of the shops they checked the bottles by striking each one with a metal rod, and I considered this music far better than that to which our guests, regarded as famous pianists, would sometimes treat us.

The workmen slept in stuffy, dark barracks on boards covered with sheepskin coats; they drank bad sour beer, sometimes they played cards, sang and swore. Few among them were literate and those who were would read out, syllable by syllable, the miscellaneous news in the *Moskovsky Listok*<sup>1</sup>. I remember an entertainment: the workmen poured some paraffin over a rat and the fiery rat darted to and fro inside a circle. I saw a poverty-stricken, dark, terrifying life and I was deeply shaken by the incompatibility of two worlds: the stinking barracks and the drawing-room where intelligent people talked about coloratura.

Not far from the brewery, on Devichye Polye, a fair with amuse-

<sup>1</sup> 'Moscow Sheet', a cheap sensational newspaper.

ment booths would be held at carnival time. I remember an elderly man, his face dusted with flour, who sang, jerking his arms and legs: 'I am an American, name the dance and I'm your man.'

The workmen would dictate to me letters to their villages and I wrote about the food, the illnesses, the weddings and the funerals.

On the other side of the brewery walls there was a lunatic asylum. I used to climb on top of the wall and look over. Emaciated people in dressing-gowns paced up and down a small courtyard littered with all kinds of rubbish; sometimes a keeper would go for one of the patients, who would scream horribly.

At the brewery there were also some Czech specialist workers. The workmen called them 'Germans'—one reason being that they ate pigeons which everyone else thought disgusting. The son of the brewer Kara killed his mother and two sisters with a chopper—he wanted to buy an expensive necklace for a Moscow beauty and his parents wouldn't give him the money. I remember snatches of sentences: 'drowning in their own blood . . . he wanted five hundred roubles . . . madly in love'. Everyone, of course, abused the killer, but I remembered the brewer's sickly son and thought to myself that the grown-ups didn't know anything about life either.

Lev Tolstoy's house was next door to the brewery. I often saw him walking along Khamovnichesky or Bozheninovsky Lane. I was given a copy of *Childhood and Boyhood*; the book struck me as dull. I got a set of old *Nivas*<sup>1</sup> with the text of *Resurrection* out of our lumber-room. My mother said 'You're too young to be reading that'. I read the novel at one sitting and thought that Tolstoy knew the whole truth. My father gave me Tolstoy's appeal, which the censorship had banned, to copy; I felt proud and copied it neatly, in block letters.

Once Tolstoy came to the brewery and asked my father to show him how beer was made. He went from shop to shop and I tagged on behind. For some reason I was sorry that the great author should be shorter than my father. Tolstoy was given a mug of hot beer; to my astonishment, he said 'that's good!' and wiped his beard with his hand. He explained to my father that beer could help in the fight against vodka. Afterwards I pondered for a long time over Tolstoy's words and began to wonder: perhaps even Tolstoy doesn't understand everything? I had been convinced that he wanted to replace falsehood by

<sup>1</sup> 'Harvest', a popular magazine

truth, and there he was talking about replacing vodka by beer. (I knew nothing about vodka except what the workmen told me—they talked about it lovingly—whereas I had been given beer to drink and hadn't liked it.)

Sometimes unrest would start up at the brewery: people would say that the students were marching to Tolstoy's house. The gates would be locked tight and sentries were posted. I would creep out into the street and wait for the mystifying students, but no one came. Occasionally students used to come to see my sisters, but in my view they were pseudo-students: they drank their tea quietly, talked about Ibsen and danced, whereas real students were supposed to throw the Cossacks off their horses, and then the Tsar off his throne.

The real students did not come. During my childhood I suffered from insomnia; once I tore a clock off the wall, driven frantic by its loud ticking. Mental images from those sleepless nights have stuck in my memory: Tolstoy wiping his beard with his hand, young Kara holding the chopper, his beloved, *Lakmé*, the lunatics, the amusement stalls and a huge fiery rat.

## 4

EVERYTHING has changed, but somehow Moscow has changed most of all. When I remember the streets of my childhood it is as though I had seen them in a film.

Perhaps the most evocative picture that rises up in my memory is that of the horse-tram. (I remember the day the first electric tram ran from Nikolayevsky Station to Strastnaya Square; we stood stupefied by this miracle of technology, and the sparks along the wire amazed us no less than sputniks amaze people today.)

The school I went to was on Volkhonka, opposite the church of Christ the Saviour. Sometimes I took the horse-tram from school to Khamovniki. It was pulled by an old mare; before the uphill bit at Prechistenka, a lad would jump on to the tram; he held the reins of a second additional horse and yelled at it piercingly. You could take the horse-tram along all the Sadovayas—that was a very long ride. At the loop lines the tram would stop; the passengers would get out and stare fatalistically into the distance, waiting for the other little vehicle to appear.

More often I would walk along Prechistenka. At the corner of one of the lanes, the Shtatny I think, there was a small church. Inside the porch, a church painter had depicted the Last Judgment: devils frying sinners over a fire. The old ladies crossed themselves fearfully, but I wanted to be one of the devils.

When, today, I see on Kropotkinskaya an old, old woman with dim troubled eyes, shambling along with a shopping bag, I think to myself: perhaps this is one of the schoolgirls who used to twitter so gaily on Prechistenka and seemed to me, not merely pretty little girls, but Woman personified, like the Venus de Milo, like Lina Cavalieri or La Belle Otéro, actresses famous for their beauty at the beginning of the century.

In summer Moscow was very green, in winter very white. The snow was never swept, and by carnival time huge snowdrifts had formed. Sledges slipped along noiselessly. In May, a snow of lilac covered the narrow, pitted pavements: every house had its front gar-

den. Church cupolas, gold or pale blue, soared up. Strange constructions—fire towers—pierced the sky; large balloons were hung from the top to help to identify the part of town where the fire was. Different areas were also distinguished by the colour of the firemen's horses: brown, black, grey. When the temperature fell to under 25 degrees below zero Fahrenheit there were no lessons; in the evenings I used to breathe on the frozen pane and look at the thermometer: perhaps the frost would harden? But next morning there was no flag on the fire tower. The fire tower was also used to signal the closing of schools on especially cold days.

During summer, in Smolensky market, they sold vegetables and fruit; mountains of water melons lay on the ground and triangles were cut out of them to show their ripe condition. Everything was sold and the haggling was merciless. Okhotny Ryad, where the Moskva Hotel is now, was always crowded; the small shops there sold pets and live-stock. Huge fish swam in tanks. Fowlers walked about hung with garlands of grouse, selling their game. Kuznetsky Most was the centre of smart Moscow. Foreign names were written up on the signs of expensive shops: the Italians Avanzo and Daziaro sold *objets d'art*, the Englishman Shanks kept a fashion shop, the Frenchmen sold scents and cosmetics, the Germans optical instruments. On the outskirts there were many tea-rooms 'not licensed to sell strong drink'. Where the Dynamo Stadium now stands there were tiny *dachas* surrounded by gardens: the country began very soon. In Red Square in spring there was a market where pussy-willow branches were sold; there you could buy an 'American'<sup>1</sup> or a 'mother-in-law's tongue'<sup>2</sup>. Women knelt outside Iverskaya Chapel.

The telephone made its appearance. It existed only in rich houses and the offices of large firms; ringing up was a complicated business—you turned a handle and when you had finished talking the exchange had to disconnect you. Electricity appeared too, but I lived for a long time amid the black snow of smoking oil lamps. Dutch stoves sparkled with gleaming tiles. Houses were fiercely heated. Grey cotton-wool lay between double window panes covered with the non-objective art of the frost; sometimes tumblers with paper roses were placed on the cotton-wool. In summer, flies buzzed. The painted floors shone. The

<sup>1</sup> A jumping toy in a bottle.

<sup>2</sup> A paper tube that distended when blown.

silence was sometimes broken by the descant of small dogs—there was a fashion for toy dogs and pugs now extinct. Porcelain Chinamen went on nodding their heads to the point of stupefaction on dressing-table tops. Pink artificial roses stood in enamel mugs bearing the Tsar's crest (souvenir of Khodynka). Jam was served with tea, and the kinds of jam were many: gooseberry, Russian strawberry, cornelian cherry, paradise apple, blackcurrant.

The first time I was taken to the theatre it was to see the *Sleeping Beauty*. Ballerinas whom the fairy put under her spell froze skilfully on their points. Schoolboys with polished buttons and schoolgirls in brown or blue uniform dresses and smart pinafores sat in the front seats of the boxes. Parents struggled with tedium in the background. My father passed me a box of chocolates; a piece of pineapple and a pair of silver tongs lay on top. I kept the tongs. Gorgeous ushers stood immobile in the foyers. Cloakroom attendants in knitted shawls held out fur coats and the fur coats looked like wild animals—otters, raccoons, foxes, sables; the forests of Siberia seemed to be crowding into the silver and bronze Bolshoi Theatre.

In the street outside, coachmen dozed as they waited for their masters. They had unbelievably huge padded chests and beards white with hoar-frost. The horses, too, turned grey in the frosty air. Sometimes, to warm themselves, the coachmen would start beating their cotton-wool breasts with stiff arms.

Cabbies slept at street corners; sometimes, waking for a moment, they called out in sleep-roughened voices: 'Where to, sir?' They droned: 'Half a rouble' and after long bargaining came after one to say: 'Very well, sir, twenty kopeks'. Then a mysterious journey across Moscow began. House porters slept in gateways. Snowdrifts stood high in the little gardens outside churches. A drunken man would suddenly shout, but a policeman wearing a hood would quickly silence him. It seemed as though everything were asleep: the fare and the cabby, the horse, Moscow.

The cabbies took their fares to Boloto (the Marsh), to Truba (the Trumpet), to Myortvy Pereulok (Dead Lane), to Nikolo-Peskovsky or Nikolo-Vorobyinsky, to Zatsepa, Zhivodyorka, Razgulyai; Strange names, not like streets in a large city but domains of medieval princes.

By the Spassky Gate of the Kremlin, on the way from Kuznetsky Most to Khamovniki, the cabby and the fare would take off their hats.

The frost prickled one's ears. Then the cabby would turn sideways to the fare and start telling a long story.

What did the Moscow cabbies talk about? Doubtless about many things: poverty and frost, the tricks the gentlemen got up to, the dark courtyards where they lived, the wife's illness or the son's conscription. Chekhov wrote one of his most heart-rending stories, *Misery*, about a conversation with a cabby. But the fares did not listen; one word only kept coming through: 'Oats'. Yes, of course, they spoke about oats; weighed down by grief, they muttered 'another ten kopeks on the fare would help, the price of oats has gone up'. They grumbled, sighed or swore, but of all their words, tender or rough, only one reached the fare's ears, a word simple and mysterious, the leitmotif of the long ride from Lefortov to Dorogomilov: 'Oats'.

In the spring the double windows were removed and Moscow instantly became unbearably noisy with the clatter of traffic. Outside some of the fine houses with colonnades, the cobbled roads were covered with asphalt, and the wheels, as though paying tribute to rank, changed to a respectful murmur.

In May the exodus to the *dachas* began. Carts piled high with sideboards, poufs, dressing-tables, and samovars moved along the streets. The cook held the canary's cage and the dog ran along beside.

At the *dachas* there were hammocks, candles with snuffers, copper bowls for jam-making and gleaming balls in the centre of flowerbeds. The grown-ups played cards, drank fruit drinks and read *Russkoye Slovo*<sup>1</sup>. The students and the older schoolboys frequented 'the platform'—that was the common term for the local dance-hall. The children waited for the ice-cream man. Sometimes everybody went off to the woods—to 'admire nature'—and, spreading rugs beneath them, lay down on the grass. In the mornings the hawkers and tinkers cried: 'Young chickens!', 'Currants, red and black!' and 'Soldering, welding! Soldering, welding!' On Sundays visitors came; they ate pies, talked about the beauties of country life and went to sleep.

Sokolniki was a forest; at the edge of it there already existed a 'ring' where concerts and performances were given. The baritone Shevelyov drove the young ladies wild: 'Whom I love, I know not'. When some former celebrity who had lost his voice took Shevelyov's place, the students led the excited young ladies down the less crowded walks and

<sup>1</sup> 'Russian Word', a moderate Liberal paper.

there it became clear that everyone knew very well who loved whom. Then it was time for bed. Then it was morning. The schoolboys pored over their Latin '*ut finale*' or played croquet; the housewives blew on the coals of samovars, haggled with the hawkers and skimmed a rose-coloured skin off the new-made jams.

The twentieth century was under way. Already Germany was making businesslike preparations for war. The English had reached agreement with the French on a military alliance; the French were allies of Russia, and at the same time the English concluded an alliance with the Japanese who were preparing an attack on Port Arthur. Workers in Petersburg and Rostov-on-Don were on strike. In Brussels Lenin was arguing with the Mensheviks. But the world in which I lived was insufferably quiet. In the second-hand bookshops on Volkhonka I read those authors whom the grown-ups tried not to mention in my presence: Gorky, Leonid Andreyev, Kuprin.

Every day I would run to the library to change my books. Reading was a passion: I wanted to understand life. I read Dostoyevsky and Brehm, Jules Verne and Turgenev, Dickens and the *Zhivopisnoye Obozreniye*<sup>1</sup>, and the more I read, the more I doubted everything. Lies surrounded me on all sides; one moment I wanted to run off to the Indian jungle, the next to throw a bomb at the Governor-General's house on Tverskaya, the next to hang myself,

I also did the round of the theatres, scrounging the money from my mother. At the Art Theatre they were doing Chekhov, Ibsen, Hauptmann, at Korsch's *Vanyushin's Children*, at the Maly *The Power of Darkness* with the famous Sadovskys. Chaliapine thundered. I remember one of our visitors telling us that soon a 'bioscope' would be opened and they would show living photographs.

Then we were assembled in the school hall and the headmaster solemnly read out a manifesto: 'We, Nicholas the Second, autocrat of all the Russias . . .' The war with Japan had begun. At school a special Mass was celebrated and we shouted 'hurrah' for a long time, till we were hoarse: they had told us there would be no lessons. The war seemed to us an endlessly long way off and I was very surprised when, soon afterwards, I saw my first cousin, Volodya Sklovsky, in uniform; he was going to Manchuria from Kiev.

That summer I went abroad with my mother and sisters, to Bad Ems

<sup>1</sup> 'The Arts Review', a popular illustrated weekly.

again; there I caught typhoid fever. However, I remember two events that particularly impressed me: the siege of Port Arthur after a battle in which the Russian army was defeated, and the death of Chekhov. That year my father lost his job and, consequently, our flat as well. He moved to the Knyazhi Dvor hotel on Volkhonka. I had failed my Latin and maths exams and had to take them again in the autumn; they sent me back to Moscow by myself in time for the beginning of the school year.

In Berlin I was supposed to go to Frau Jenicke's family pension where my mother used to stay. On the walls at Frau Jenicke's there were samplers with pious sayings embroidered in satin-stitch. I got bored and that evening I went off to the Friedrichstrasse, dropping into a café which turned out to be a night-club. The waiters looked askance at me but nevertheless served me with pastries; however, they charged so much that I was obliged to send a begging telegram to my mother for more money to go on to Moscow.

The room at the Knyazhi Dvor was small, with a divan and an alcove, but hotel life was to my liking—I felt free. My father would go out in the mornings, saying that he was looking for a job. After school I brought friends back with me, boasted that I was living on my own; we would order a samovar and buns and amuse ourselves as we would.

(In the autumn of 1920, having made my way from the Crimea to Moscow, I had no room to go to. I had come from Tbilisi as diplomatic courier of the Soviet embassy and they found me a bed at what used to be the Knyazhi Dvor, and was now the *Narkomindel's*<sup>1</sup> hotel. Downstairs one had to show one's pass. The man on duty yelled 'Where are you ringing from?' down the telephone. In the dining-room we were served with wheat or barley gruel: times were bad. But, as in my childhood, the Knyazhi Dvor enchanted me.)

When we gathered in the room at the Knyazhi Dvor we did not only eat buns and amuse ourselves: that autumn, politics knocked for the first time on the window of my life. I began reading the newspapers. The Japanese were giving us a licking; this was bitter, but we understood that the autocracy was at the root of the whole trouble. One of my schoolmates had an uncle who was connected with the Socialist Revolutionaries; this uncle said that there would soon be a revolution, that it would be necessary to disarm the Cossacks and the police, then a republic would be proclaimed.

<sup>1</sup> People's Commissariat of Home Affairs.

I read *Crime and Punishment*; the fate of Sonya caused me acute pain. Again I thought about the barracks of the Khamovniki brewery. Everything, but positively everything, must be turned upside down.

True, I was faced with other temptations, such as the schoolgirl Musya; she played *Songs Without Words* on the piano and later I used to kiss her in the entrance hall. But at the centre of my life was the presentiment of great and strange events. Only a little earlier, a small boy in Berlin had found thrills in pastries with whipped cream: somehow I had grown up all at once.

In my first novel, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Julio Jurenito*, one of the disciples bears my name. He is an invented character: I have never worked as cashier in a brothel owned by Mr Cool or taken machine-guns to the Vatican. But the character called Ilya Ehrenburg sometimes voiced my real thoughts. There is in the novel an argument about what is better: to affirm or to deny, and Jurenito's disciple, Ilya Ehrenburg, remembering the words of Ecclesiastes that there is a time to gather stones and a time to cast stones, says that he has only one face, not two, that he does not know how to build and would rather throw stones.

I wrote *Jurenito* at the age of thirty; during the autumn I am describing I was thirteen. I had not heard of Ecclesiastes at that time, but I was dying to throw as many stones as possible. Childhood was ending. Nineteen Five was on its way.

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# 5

DURING the last census a young girl enumerator came to my flat. She glanced at the walls in surprise: the Picassos shocked her.

'Don't tell me you really like that?'

'Very much.'

'Well, I don't believe you. You're only saying that because he's a friend of yours.'

Then I started answering her questions.

'Education record?'

'Secondary school, but I never finished.'

The girl took offence.

'I'm asking you seriously.'

'I'm telling you seriously.'

'You're making fun of me. I've read your books . . . A census is an important State matter. Why don't you want to give a proper answer?'

She went away offended. Yet I had told her the truth: in the autumn of 1907 I was expelled before I had even reached the top form.

Much has been written about the Russian gymnasium—by Garin-Mikhailovsky, Veresayev, Paustovsky, Kaverin. It looks to me as if every gymnasium was like all the others. Of course I learnt a few things at school—both from some of the teachers and from my school-mates—but not so very much when all is said and done. Books were a far better school, and also the people I met outside the walls of the gymnasium.

The boys entered the school from a narrow lane. Hundreds of uniform overcoats hung in a vast cloakroom. This was commonly the scene of battles between 'Greeks' and 'Persians', whilst the small fry 'made butter' by pushing one another against the walls. When I was in the preparatory form I saw a crowd of boys beating another boy in the cloakroom; they had covered him with a pile of overcoats so that no marks would show: they beat him lustily and long, and as they did so they sang 'Sneak, sneak, filthy beak'. From that day a revulsion against all sneaks or, to use adult language, informers became firmly lodged

in my mind and I have carried it with me throughout my life. The gymnasium bred in me a sense of solidarity; we never stopped to think whether anyone who got into trouble was guilty or innocent but protected him by shouting in unison: 'We all did it! We all did it!'

(In 1938 a mistress at a children's home where some Spanish children had been placed complained to me that they were 'difficult' because they were 'anarchists'. It turned out that the children had smashed a vase while playing and, to the question who had done it, had answered 'Everybody'. I tried for a long time to convince the teacher that this didn't indicate anarchism but its opposite. I didn't succeed.)

On solemn occasions we assembled in the large hall; portraits of four Tsars hung on the walls and there were marble tablets bearing the names of former pupils who had received medals. The headmaster was called Yosif Osvaldovich Gobza; pointing to the tablets he used to tell us that the Minister of Education, Bogolepov, had been educated within the walls of the First Gymnasium.

I remember the school lavatories with great affection: they were our clubs. A schoolmaster might unexpectedly look inside the lavatories for the four lower forms and chase out the idlers, but once I had moved up to the fifth form I found a lavatory vested with constitutional rights; you could even smoke there. The walls were covered with obscene drawings and rhymes like 'It isn't right Except at night'. In the small fry's lavatory one swapped marbles or stamps, and boys who had failed their exams and had to do a year over again (they were known as Kamchatka men) swore that they visited brothels as a regular thing. In the lavatory for the upper forms we talked about Leonid Andreyev's *In the Mist*, Amfiteatrov's exposures, the Decadents, the chorus-girls at Aumont's theatre and many other things.

However, I did not stay long in the upper school and my memories relate principally to the third and fourth forms. During the main break we dashed to the refectory; someone hastily said grace; then the place became a regular stock exchange—carrot pie was traded for rissoles or rice pasties. Our name for the refectory superintendent was Artyom the Snotty Turkeycock.

For a couple of years a particular form of gambling flourished: you put five kopeks on which master would leave the staff room first. Two 'Kamchatka men' kept the bank. There were some favourites who often came out first—it was difficult to make more than ten kopeks on those—but I remember that once somebody won as much as two

roubles on the German master Setingson, who usually came out last and on that occasion had jumped the queue.

The subjects I liked best were Russian and history; I was on bad terms with maths and, for some reason, hated Latin. The Russian master was Vladimir Alexandrovich Sokolov, a great joker; whenever he called on me to answer a question, he invariably said, 'Now, Ehrenmerin . . .' At that time I did not know that *merin* is a gelding and did not take offence. I think it was in the fourth form that we stopped doing paraphrases and began writing essays; for all my laziness, writing an essay was a wonderful thrill. Vladimir Alexandrovich both praised and scolded me: 'You never listen in class and invent it all yourself—you'll see, they'll chuck you out for writing this kind of stuff and you'll end up as a shoemaker.'

It's a pity that today I can't check what it was that Vladimir Alexandrovich scolded me for and what was the forbidden matter in my school compositions. But generally speaking, when I became an author, the critics went on for a full fifty years repeating Vladimir Alexandrovich's words (they're still doing it now): 'Never listens in class, invents it all himself . . .'

When I brought home a bad report my father used to say that I was a blockhead, that I'd be expelled and then I should have to go to Kreiman's gymnasium, notorious for taking on expelled boys. (I did not know then that the poet Bryusov had gone to Kreiman's.) Later my father stopped threatening me with Kreiman's but simply prophesied, like Vladimir Alexandrovich: 'You'll end up as a shoemaker'. I have had to follow a variety of occupations in my lifetime, many of them unpleasant, but I never learnt to make shoes.

In the junior forms I was keen on Greek mythology. Then the natural history master A. A. Kruber (as far as I remember, a clever and lively man) found me a responsive pupil. My interest in history did not wane, but by the time I reached the fourth form I was interested in the more recent past rather than in Greek goddesses. When I wrote an essay saying that the liberation of the serfs had taken place not from above but from below, the headmaster summoned my father.

In the third form I became the editor of a handwritten journal called the *New Ray*. This journal was kept out of sight of the masters, although it contained nothing more dreadful than verses about liberty and little stories describing the absurdities of school life.

I used to walk to school along Prechistenka. Two buildings began

to occupy my attention from an early age: Arsenyeva's school for girls and Dame Chertkova's Institute for Young Ladies. When I moved up to the fourth form I felt I was an adult and started falling in love with a whole variety of schoolgirls, leaving school before the end of the last lesson, waiting for the girl at the gate of her school and carrying her books, neatly wrapped in oilcloth. I also made acquaintance with other girls' schools, such as Alferov's on the Arbat and Bryukhonenko's on Vozdvizhenka.

Opposite the gymnasium, by the cathedral, there was a pretty square with a garden; there we used to walk, arrange meetings with schoolgirls, make jealous scenes and pose as Pechorin.

When I moved up to the fifth form, I broke off the crest on my school cap bearing the roman figure I, the number of the school I attended; this was done by all 'conscious' schoolboys. We wore our uniform jacket like a civilian coat, over a Russian high-necked shirt. We tried to imitate the students by dressing carelessly, assuming a disrespectful air and waving our hands about when discussing the books we had read.

Some schoolboys were aesthetes; these despised the poems of Nadson and Apukhtin, still greatly admired by the girls, and shocked their chosen ones by writing in the inescapable albums: 'O woman, I myself have called you into being'. There were also the dandies, precociously burning the candle at both ends, the *stilyagi* of those days; they wore very wide, pale blue peaked caps, talked about races, chorus-girls and dances, and boasted how at last night's party they had drunk French liqueur, and then . . . What happened then was heard only by the braggart's bosom friend.

Often, when I am in the Hall of Columns, I remember the first time I went there. It was then called the Great Hall of the Assembly of Nobles. I had gone to a concert 'in aid of indigent pupils of the Moscow First Gymnasium'. First Chaliapine sang about the flea. The boys from the upper school received this with equanimity, saying that Chaliapine always sang about the flea, but I was only a second form boy and repeated, enthralled: 'Ha-ha, a flea!' Then there was dancing. They had tried to teach me to dance; I knew that there were dozens of immensely complicated dances: the pas-de-patineur, the pas-d'Espagne, the Hungarian dance, the mazurka, the mignonne, the chaconne and others; but I mixed up all the *pas* and, worst of all, invariably trod on the toes of the girl I had asked to dance. I did not want to disgrace myself in the

Assembly of Nobles and went up to the gallery. There I unexpectedly beheld my assistant form master, rose to my feet out of habit and greeted him in a very loud voice. The assistant form master was making advances to a fat young lady and was very angry with me.

When I was in the fourth form I once went with a few classmates to ask some actors to take part in a charity concert. We went to the house of the famous singer Nezhdanova. I clutched my white gloves in my hand and suffered because of my lack of *savoir-faire*. My schoolfellows were bolder.

Our form had its 'lion', a Prince Drutskoy; he was an excellent dancer and knew how to talk to girls. At thirteen I used to envy him. But only a year later he seemed to me of no interest. I read Chernyshevsky, pamphlets on political economy, *Germinal*, tried to speak in a deep voice and explained on Prechistensky Boulevard to Nadya Zorina, the daughter of a singing master, that love helps a hero to fight and die for freedom.

The girls whom I used to see home from school changed often: at fourteen, I did not suffer from constancy. Sometimes I would invite them to Pelevin's cake shop in Ostozhenka, where you could buy a pastry for three kopeks. The girls seemed to be unearthly creatures but their appetites were hearty and once I had to leave my schoolcap at the shop as a pledge.

At that time we were living in Savelovsky Lane off Ostozhenka. The flat was a large one and I had a room of my own. I insisted that my parents should not enter my room without knocking. My mother obeyed, but my father laughed at my whims.

At a stationer's in Ostozhenka I used to buy postcards with pictures of chorus-girls, preferably naked ones; I believed that one should think about women as little as possible, but in fact I thought about them too much. I remember a photograph of Natasha Trukhanova, a famous beauty who drove me wild. A quarter of a century later, in Paris, I met A. A. Ignatyev, formerly military attaché in France, then a member of the staff of our trade delegation; his wife turned out to be the Natasha who had enchanted me in adolescence. I told her about the old picture postcard and my story made her laugh.

My first love belongs to a slightly later period, the autumn of 1907, when I had already been expelled from school. The schoolgirl's name was Nadya. Her brother, Sergey Beloborodov, was a Bolshevik. Nadya's father read the *Moskovskiye Vedomosti* and looked upon me

with dislike. I was a revolutionary and a Jew into the bargain and had designs on Nadya's innocence. Almost every day we wrote long letters to each other containing psychological analyses of our relationship, reproaches and solemn promises, letters jealous, passionate and philosophical. We were both sixteen years old and, I daresay both of us were less absorbed in each other than in our vague presentiment of life opening before us.

Let me return to the gymnasium. I had met some boys from the upper forms. From them I heard for the first time about historical materialism, surplus value, and a multitude of things which seemed to me exceedingly important and created an abrupt break in my life.

It was the turbulent year of Nineteen Five. The university became a meeting hall. I often went there. Working men sat in the lecture rooms side by side with students. We sang the *Marseillaise* and *Varshavyanka*. Girl students handed out leaflets. Huge hats inscribed 'your contribution means arms for us' were passed from hand to hand.

I was walking along Mokhavaya. Suddenly the students' caps began to whirl like autumn leaves. Someone shouted: 'Okhotny Ryad men!' Everyone rushed inside the University courtyard and began to prepare for the defence of the fortress. We were organised in groups of ten: I chalked a figure on my uniform greatcoat. We carried stones upstairs to the lecture rooms: if the enemy broke through we would stop them by hurling stones. Camp fires were lit; we ate sausage sandwiches and sang till morning; 'Boldly, friends, boldly, never lose courage in the unequal fight'. I wasn't yet fifteen, so it is easy to understand that I didn't lose courage.

I remember the funeral of Bauman<sup>1</sup>. Coming back from the cemetery we heard firing. I remember a Cossack with an ear-ring in one ear and a whip. I remember that December: that was when I first saw blood on the snow. I helped to build barricades by Kudrin Square. I shall never forget that Christmas: the heavy, terrible silence after the singing, the shouting, the firing. The ruins of Presnya stood very black. The boots of the guardsmen of the Semyonovsky and Preobrazhensky regiments crushed the snow and the snow squeaked piteously. Going back to school after the Christmas holidays I

<sup>1</sup> A leader of the Moscow Bolsheviks, shot by a police agent during a demonstration.

looked around absently, engrossed in my own private thoughts: I must find an underground organisation—the greatest battles lie ahead.

I spent another year at school as though not noticing that there were such things as schoolwork, lessons, marks. One thing only occupied me: I was comparing the programmes of the Social Democrats and the Socialist Revolutionaries. The latter had romanticism on their side: battle groups, terrorism, the role of the individual. But to me they seemed too romantic: I remembered the workmen at the Khamovniki brewery and was drawn to the Bolsheviks, to the romanticism of the unromantic. I was already reading Lenin's articles and understood that the Mensheviks were moderates, more like my father. Often I repeated to myself the word 'justice'. It is a very hard word, sometimes cold like metal in the frost, but to me then it seemed warm, friendly, a word I could love.

Once I had an argument with my father. It turned out that he hadn't even heard of the Mensheviks; what he liked were the Kadets<sup>1</sup>. I tried for a long time to convince him that a revolution was necessary. He said: 'Maybe you're right. But the chief thing is tolerance'. It is hard to make tolerance attractive to a fifteen-year-old with a bristly shock of hair and a long-standing desire to pick up heavy, immobile stones and throw them about. 'All or nothing!' This cry of one of Ibsen's heroes I wrote as a motto in my notebook and, despite my contempt for poetry, I repeated the verse of A. N. Tolstoy: 'If you love, then love with passion, if you threaten, mean it well . . .'

The year Nineteen Six decided my destiny. It was a difficult and clamorous year: the waves of revolution still seethed, but the ebb was already beginning. People were saying—some sorrowfully, others with pleasure—that the storm was over; the seamen's risings in Kronstadt and Sveaborg seemed like the last peals of thunder. The schoolboys settled down and went back to their textbooks; there were no more meetings at the university, nor demonstrations, nor barricades. That year I entered the Bolshevik organisation and soon it was goodbye to my schooldays.

In 1958 a former classmate of mine, Vasya Krashennikov, by profession a doctor, tracked me down and came to see me. In old age people begin to hanker for the half-forgotten friends of their childhood

<sup>1</sup> Constitutional Democratic Party (a capitalist party of Liberal trend).

and adolescence. Krashennikov had decided to arrange a gathering of those of our schoolfellows who were still alive and in Moscow. We dined at the *Praga* restaurant, five citizens of an age now customarily described as 'retiring', and remembered our school pranks, our teachers, the girls we had known.

The restaurant filled up gradually; I was sitting with my back to the room and did not see the other diners; suddenly I looked round and was thunderstruck—all round us were *stilyagi*—tousled girls with incredibly bright make-up, young lads in check jackets and with permanently waved hair, the direct descendants of those schoolboys who had worn pale blue caps and of the 'white lining' students<sup>1</sup>. They danced, and when the music stopped there was silence: only the five old men at the corner table carried on a lively conversation.

I don't know why fate played such a cruel trick on us: we had fixed our meeting at a place frequented by the *stilyagi*. In truth, there aren't many of them. As for us, we had been perfectly ordinary schoolboys at the start of the century, who had lived like everyone else, had survived by pure chance, and that night we were talking about the youth of the present day not with the nagging disapproval of old men but with affection and trust.

'Why didn't you like Valya Kozlinskaya?' Krashennikov was asking me, 'everybody was in love with her.' I don't know why—I don't remember. Was it because I was in love with Nadya? Or perhaps because I was living in the future: to my mother's utter horror, I used to receive visits from Dmitry, a student member of a battle group, and he used to show me and my friends how to handle a revolver.

<sup>1</sup> Rich students affected white silk linings to their uniform greatcoats in Tsarist days.

## 6

THE PAST gets forgotten; one can still remember some things, but others have gone for ever.

In a volume of *Literaturnoye Nasledstvo*<sup>1</sup> devoted to Mayakovsky I found a report by the chief of the Moscow Security Department, Major von Koten, on the underground Social Democratic organisation in Moscow's secondary schools. For a long time I pored over some of the names, unable to remember the people concerned. Nevertheless the security man's report brought many things back to life in my memory. Here is an extract from it:

'A more outstanding role was played by Brilliant, Faydysh, Ehrenburg and Anŭia Vydrina . . . The party has acquired new workers in its support among the secondary-school pupils; Faydysh is a member of the Military Technical Bureau; Ehrenburg, Sokolov, Sakharova, Bukharin and Brilliant are district propagandists; Rokshanin is a "technician" for the Zamoskvoretsky district and Antonov a "technician" for the City district.'

The security chief had got a few things wrong. So far as I was concerned, I first joined a general party organisation and only later began, among other things, to occupy myself with schools affairs. As far back as 1906 I met the Bolshevik Yegorova: she had very fair hair and a rounded forehead. First I distributed 'literature', then I became an 'organizer' in the Zamoskvoretsky district. The thing I feared most was that the comrades might guess my age and say that a fifteen-year-old could not be entrusted with important missions.

(Many years later I learnt that Mayakovsky started his party work even before he was fifteen; such, it appears, was the spirit of the age.)

The time to speak about all my comrades in the schools organisation has not yet come. But let me mention a few. Senya Chlenov resembled a good-natured kitten: a broad face, a habit of screwing up his eyes, imperturbable and with a faint smile. He used to explain to us the role of foreign capital, Anglo-German antagonism, the greed

<sup>1</sup> 'Literary Heritage', a series of previously unpublished literary remains.

and backwardness of the Russian bourgeoisie, but after delivering a serious paper he would readily chat about the Decadents, the Art Theatre, the satirical novels of Anatole France. Many years later I met him again in Paris—he was legal counsellor at the Soviet Embassy. It was odd to see how little he had changed; clearly he had already been perfectly formed, polished, at the age of eighteen.

In Paris we made friends. He was a complex man, a sybarite and at the same time a revolutionary. Recognising the shortcomings, he nevertheless remained loyal to the cause with which he had linked his life. Among the enlightened Romans of the third century who had embraced Christianity there were probably some like Semyon Borisovich Chlenov (we called him Essbee): men who saw how imperfect the statues of the Good Shepherd were compared with those of Apollo, yet faced torture and execution together with the other Christians. I remember travelling once from Moscow to Paris; at Negoreloye, the frontier station, stood a train going the other way; Essbee was smiling lazily in the restaurant car. I never saw him again—that was at the end of 1935 . . .

Valya Neumark, an awkward, short-sighted, shy boy, was for me a model of modesty and loyalty. He was arrested the same night as myself; released; later arrested on another charge and sent to Siberia. He escaped abroad. I went to see him at the small French town of Morteau on the Swiss border. Valya was working in a watch factory. In 1909 I was already writing poetry; I was full of inner contradictions—now dreaming of going back to Russia and giving myself wholly to illegal work, now wandering about Paris, entranced by the city, repeating to myself the verses about the Beautiful Lady. Whereas Valya was still the same; he was a member of the local Socialist organisation, studied party literature; at night he would explain to me with gentle fervour that in another year or two the revolution would begin in Russia. I heard that during the Civil War he was hanged by the Whites.

Lvov was a minor post-office official and lived in a government flat on Myasnitskaya; he thought that his daughters would quietly get married, but the daughters preferred the underground movement. When Nadya Lvova was arrested she was not yet seventeen, and under the law she was allowed bail on her father's recognisances. She told a police colonel: 'If you let me out, I'll go on working'. Nadya loved poetry; she tried reading Blok, Balmont and Bryusov to me. But I was afraid of anything that might divide me. I was drawn towards art, yet

hated it. I used to mock Nadya's passion for poetry, saying that poetry was nonsense—'one must take oneself in hand'. Despite her love of poetry she splendidly fulfilled all the tasks of the underground organisation. She was a sweet girl, modest, with innocent eyes and brown hair smoothly combed back. Her elder sister Marusya treated her with respect. Nadya went to the Elizavetinskaya school, moved up to the top (eighth) form at sixteen and graduated with a gold medal. I often thought—there's somebody with strength of character!

We parted in 1908 (I saw her before going abroad). Two years later she began writing poetry. I don't know the circumstances in which she met Valery Bryusov. In the autumn of 1913 two books were published: *An Old Tale* by N. Lvova and *Poems for Nelly* by an unnamed author, dedicated to N. Lvova, with a prefatory poem by V. Bryusov, who was in fact the author of the anonymous book.

Bryusov wrote: 'Time to admit it—I'm not young; my fortieth year soon. . . .' Nadya wrote: 'But when I was about to go home alone I suddenly noticed that you were no longer young, that your right temple was almost grey, and I was so sorry it made me feel cold.' Those lines were written in the autumn of 1913, and on 27th November Nadya committed suicide. She had been translating some poems by Jules Laforgue, who wrote about the unbearable boredom of Sundays; in one of his poems a schoolgirl throws herself into the river from a quay for no known reason. Bryusov often used to talk about suicide; one of his poems had as its epigraph the words from Tyutchev: 'Who, in the excess of feeling, when the blood boils and freezes, has not known your temptations—Suicide and Love?' And Nadya shot herself. In the preface to the posthumous edition of her book I read: 'In Lvova's life there were no significant external events.' Dear Lord, how many events do there have to be in a person's life? At fifteen Nadya became an underground worker, at sixteen she was arrested, at nineteen she began to write poetry, at twenty-two she realised: 'I'm only a poetess'—and shot herself. I'd have said that was enough.

I had not yet met Valery Bryusov when I received from him a letter in which he described to me his feelings after Nadya's suicide. I was not surprised that she had told him about me; but why a famous poet whom I regarded as a master should have taken it into his head to explain himself to me I cannot fathom to this day.

In the underground movement I did all the things everybody else did: wrote leaflets and boiled gelatine in a frying-pan—we used to

print our leaflets on a hectograph—looked for ‘contacts’ and wrote down addresses on cigarette paper which I could swallow if arrested, expounded Lenin’s articles to ‘workers’ circles’, argued with the Mensheviks till I was hoarse and did my utmost to observe the rules of conspiracy.

The notebooks which were taken away from me when I was arrested help me to reconstruct my personality as it was then. One of the notebooks, according to the text of the charge preferred against me, contained ‘a variety of statistical information relating to Russian finance, public education, industry and agriculture and also strikes and lockouts in Germany’; another—‘have a word with Boris’, ‘flat’, ‘buy books’, ‘re legal newspapers’, ‘pass on rubber stamp’, ‘tell Timofey about contact and have a word about lectures’, ‘inform Khamovniki comrades about print’, ‘phone the Weaver’.

In winter we often met in cafés and threw pennies into the bellies of noisy automatic barrel organs so that the sound of the music should drown our discussions. In the cafés we got sausage cut into cubes and forks with broken prongs; the sausage stank so badly that even mustard didn’t help. We munched our sugar instead of putting it into the tea and broke pieces off the sugar loaf with black tongs. The cafés were noisy but not gay; people came in to get warm, and the harsh misery of home did not forsake them.

Once I went to an all-night café for cabbies. Before that I had been to a city meeting in Maryina Roshcha; we had been raided, but everyone had managed to get away. I went inside the café to hide from the *shpiki* (police spies). Tired cabbies were sitting about. Although I drank my tea out of the saucer and even tried to grunt in the approved manner, I was doubtless the very picture of the classic ‘trouble-maker’ every policeman dreams of. However, the cabbies paid no attention to me; only one suddenly stood up with a clatter, looked at me slyly and said ‘What sort of a life is this?’ I ran out at once.

On the whole I was lucky. One evening I was stopped on the embankment near Butikov’s factory. I had leaflets on me. I was taken to the police station. The policeman walked by my side. When we were crossing Ostozhenka he halted to let a cab go by, I meanwhile managed to run across first and throw away the leaflets. They kept me at the police station for several hours, then the inspector came, swore, and I was released. Once the wife of the workman in whose flat we used to meet denounced us. She was jealous of her husband and

decided to pay him out; but evidently she told the policeman some cock-and-bull story—he searched under the bed, lifted up the floorboards, felt our pockets for arms, and having found nothing went away again without even asking who we were.

Recently among the State Archives in the Pirogovskaya I came across a faded scrap of paper; it reminded me that 'on the night of 31st October/1st November 1907 a search was carried out at the home of the schoolboy Ilya Grigoryev Ehrenburg living in the house of the Varvaryinsky Company in Savelyevsk Lane' and that 'nothing prohibited was found' but 'a musical score of the *Russian Marseillaise* and some postcards were taken away'.

In the sub-district to which I was assigned there was Sladkov's wallpaper factory. I made friends with the mechanic, Timofey Ivanovich Ilyushin, an energetic man of extraordinary vitality. A strike was organized at the factory; I spoke at meetings and started a collection among students for the strike committee.

Another man I liked was Vasily Ivanovich Chadushkin, a cabinet-maker always full of fun. Neither he nor Ilyushin was in the least like the grim workmen at the Khamovniki brewery whom I had known in my childhood. Nineteen Five had not passed without a trace: a workers' *avant-garde* had begun to form. My new friends taught me an inner gaiety. They had a wretched life, worked hard and nevertheless they were always joking. For me, revolutionary activity was a release from falsehood; for them it was natural work, complicated, but their very own.

I well remember certain landscapes. Near Shabolovka there was a large patch of waste ground, overgrown here and there with pathetic tufts of grass; barefooted workmen lay about on the ground. That is where we used to meet, to discuss the latest article in *Vperyod*<sup>1</sup> and the fact that the workers at Sladkov's wallpaper factory wanted the management to provide soap in the washrooms. Invariably a look-out was posted: the fierce policeman nicknamed 'The Gimlet' might come by. We also used to meet at the Tatar Cemetery, among the old grave-stones; dandelions and buttercups grew there in summer. The Vorobyev Hills were another favourite meeting place. Up at the top proprietors of tea stalls touted for the respectable customers. Samovars steamed, vodka bottles gurgled. The accordion lamented: 'Oh, why

<sup>1</sup> 'Forward', daily paper of the Bolshevik Party, published in St Petersburg in 1906.

was the night so beautiful . . . ' We used to meet down below in a little wood, to talk about 'contacts', about hectographed leaflets, about how one of the organisers got caught with the addresses yesterday.

I remember the election of candidates for the Stockholm Congress. The Bolsheviks were supposed to invite a Menshevik to their pre-election meetings, and the Mensheviks were supposed to invite a Bolshevik. One always hates the people who are rather close to one; I daresay I hated the Kadets less than I did the Mensheviks. I went to a meeting of Menshevik printworkers, where my eloquence proved fruitless. Then there was a meeting of ten or fifteen workers from a brickworks where there was a Menshevik organisation. A young girl, very serious and shy of everybody and everything, spoke for the Mensheviks; I, on the other hand, was insolent, jeered at the Mensheviks, and came out victorious: the workers voted for the Bolshevik delegate. The girl almost wept. We left together. I was sorry for her, but only smiled—I had smashed the opportunists, after all!

They say that sometimes a man cannot recognise himself in a looking-glass. It is even harder to recognise oneself in the clouded mirror of the past. When people ask me about the beginnings of my literary work, I mention the poems I wrote in the spring of 1909. In fact my first writings relate to the year 1907, and they have much more to do with amateur journalism than with poetry. A leading article I wrote for the journal *Zveno*<sup>1</sup> has been preserved among the archives in the Pirogovskaya. It is brimful of the emotionalism of a sixteen-year-old tyro. 'Our journal is being launched at a difficult time. Black reaction has seized all Russia. The advance guard of the revolution—the proletariat—has not yet recovered from its defeats, not yet healed its wounds. Its enemies rejoice. With cries of "woe to the defeated" they hurl themselves at the revolutionary army and above all at its leader—Russian Social Democracy. With a firm knowledge of new strength, with a clear faith in final victory the proletariat, driven underground, is sharpening its weapons—building its workers' party. We share its faith. The system where abject poverty, the power of the rouble and the Cossack's whip reign side by side with luxury and vice is deeply loathsome to us. We are firmly convinced of its inevitable fall and of the advent of the bright kingdom of liberty, equality, fraternity. A token of this is the great international struggle of the

<sup>1</sup> 'The Link'.

proletariat in the ranks of Social Democracy. It summons all the insulted and the injured, all who sincerely long for a new birth of mankind, under the red banner. The path along which it goes forward to its goal—Socialism—is thorny but true. And there are and must be no onlookers in this historic struggle: who is not with Socialism is against it. To those of our schools population who have decided to give their lives to the cause of the liberation of labour our words shall be directed. We want to prepare them for the difficult role of being the trumpeters and drummers of the great class, we want to teach them the science of struggle, we want to forge for them a strong link with the messiah of the future—the proletariat.' I have quoted my first literary exercise in full not, of course, because it strikes me as successful; I want to show how words get inflated and change their meaning. In 1907 I longed to become a trumpeter and drummer so that, in 1957, I might write 'an orchestra isn't all trumpets or drums . . .'

Another of my compositions, entitled *Two Years of the United Party*, has not been preserved. To judge by the security officer's précis, I said that the party should not neglect all aspects of legal work and at the same time should intensify its illegal activities. Questions of party tactics, arguments between different factions absorbed me at that time. I was fond of talking about conciliation, but I talked about it in an unreconciled way.

At meetings I used to come across Varya, Timofey, Tanya, Yegor-Morgun. Both Yegor and Tanya were students. Sometimes I used to go with Nikolay Ivanovich to see Tanya or Lida Nedokoneva in the evenings; they were living on Vladimiro-Dolgorukovskaya; we talked about party matters, but we used to joke and laugh as well. Recently, after a gap of fifty years, I met Tanya again; she turned out to be O. P. Nogina. We remembered the distant past: how we, novice propagandists, used to meet at the power-station where P. G. Smidovich worked, what good jokes Nikolay Ivanovich used to make, how bold and bright was our early youth.

I often met someone I knew as Makar and only many years later did I find out that 'Makar' was the name of V. P. Nogin<sup>1</sup>.

Once a man with tired, kindly eyes came to a city meeting. I looked at him with respect, knowing that he was a member of the Central Committee. Innokenty (I. F. Dubrovinsky) spoke attentively with

<sup>1</sup> One of the first Bolsheviks (1878-1924).

each of us; to one of the comrades he said 'You don't look well—you should take a rest . . .' I remember the effect those words had on me: they did not accord with my idea of the revolution; or rather, I had a strong desire for ordinary human kindness but considered it to be a weakness, a hangover from the past, 'intelligentsia stuff'.

In the autumn of 1907 I was given the job of establishing contacts with the soldiers and setting up an organisation in the barracks. The difficulty and responsibility of the job excited me. I was given a party seal—all that remained after the latest confiscation; I stamped the counterfoils of two receipt books for collecting funds, and was foolish enough to keep the seal at home, thinking that it was well hidden. (In the text of the charge it says that the items confiscated from me included a 'rubber stamp' of the 'Military Organization of the Moscow Committee of the Russian Social-Democratic Party'.) I managed to meet an army clerk from the Nesvizhsky regiment; he brought along three men from the machine-gun platoon; later these were joined by a volunteer, then another soldier, in all six men—one of the rough sketches for the Red Army . . .

I went on reading novels and going to the theatre; sometimes I met acquaintances who were remote from politics. The historians call those times 'the onset of reaction'. A troubled period had begun after the brilliant Year Five: everyone was searching for something, conducting lively arguments, getting excited, but behind it all one felt weariness, disillusion, emptiness.

Instead of the mignonne and chaconne of my childhood, the young ladies were practising the cake-walk and maxixe in front of their nervous mammas; enlightened humanity was advancing towards the foxtrot. The students argued whether Artsybashev's Sanin was the ideal modern man: the work in question had a touch of Nietzschean philosophy for the not-too-exacting, an eroticism nearer to the stable than to Oscar Wilde, and something of the outspokenness of the new age. A story by Anatoly Kamensky appeared, describing in detail how a certain officer found time to seduce four women in a single day. Leonid Andreyev's *Life of Man*, a naïve attempt at a generalisation of life as interpreted by 'Someone in Grey' in the corner of the stage, was put on by the Art Theatre. The Moscow intelligentsia hummed or whistled the polka from this play. The same theatre staged Maeterlinck's *The Blind*, and the symbolistic howling gave impressionable ladies neurasthenia. Nobody foresaw the barley gruel and question-

naires of ten years ahead; life seemed too calm, people looked for unhappiness in art as one might look for a raw material in short supply. The epoch of God-seeking, of the Scandinavian *Almanacs*, of the 'Magic of the Dead' was beginning.

One might have thought that my intransigence would have acted as an armour; but no, art penetrated even into my underground world. At night I read Hamsun—*Pan*, *Victoria*, *The Mysteries*; I cursed myself for my weakness, but was enthralled nevertheless: I felt the presence of another world—nature, images, sounds, colours. Chekhov shook me even then by his truthfulness which I could not understand but which was incontestable; I whispered 'Misysus, where are you?', I was in love with the 'lady with a dog'. I saw Isadora Duncan; she wore a Greek tunic and her dancing was not in the least like Geltzer's. I said to myself as before that all this was nonsense, but sometimes I could not take refuge from the 'nonsense'. When still a schoolboy I had said to a girl with whom I had fallen in love: 'Korolenko says that man is made for happiness as a bird is made for flight.' I fell in love often and I badly wanted happiness, but I devoted all my strength, all my time to something else. The epithet 'monolithic' is often used as a term of praise in this country; but a monolith is a mass of stone. Human beings are far more complex. Even at sixteen. . . .

The papers were racy and grim. The S.R.s were all for expropriation. People were hanged. At night, security men ripped up mattresses and shook out eighty volumes of Brockhaus and Efron's encyclopedia.

At that time Blok was writing: 'I recognize you, life! I accept you! And I salute you with the ringing of my shield.' But I didn't know any Blok. There were very many things I didn't know: I was a small monolith with a large crack in it. I used to go and see Asya Yakovleva, a schoolgirl; she was two years older than I and certainly understood more about the tangled skein of human emotions. I would tell her about the conclusions of the London Congress and try to overcome the host of things jostling in my breast. We used to quarrel and make it up again. For the Christmas holidays Asya went off to Bobrov, promising in the first place to wipe the floor with the S.R.s down there and secondly to think seriously about our relationship. When I was arrested they took from me one of her letters which began with the words 'Ilya, I should like to talk to you more quietly . . .' At the end there was a postscript: 'I haven't read the report because almost all the S.R.s have vanished, or maybe the fighting spirit has gone.'

It was difficult to argue over Plekhanov's article and at the same time to dream of happiness. I mention this because, unlike many writers who are contemporaries, I saw very early in life a tiny model of the spiritual world in which I was to live for a good fifty years. Out in the street it was still—if not according to the calendar, at least according to the way of life—the nineteenth century, with the solemn vows of Herzen and Ogarev, with 'vertigo of the heart', with Pauline Viardot, with *The Seagull*, with Nadson's poems, but I, between meetings and Hamsun's novels, already had premonitions of the climate of another age.

I am poking fun at a schoolboy's self-confidence; but it was precisely in those years that many things were determined for me. Of course, I have trodden a devious path; life is not a highway, and art both raises a man up and often leads him down side turnings. And yet I realise that the sixteen-year-old youth who wrote those naïve leaflets is close to me today. The one thing that has enabled me to survive the years of doubt and disenchantment is my awareness that the cause to which more than fifty years ago I gave myself is dictated both by the reason of the age and by my own conscience.

They came for me at two o'clock in the morning; I was fast asleep and was awakened by the voices of the policeman, the *shpiks*, the witnesses. I had no time to destroy anything. The search went on till morning. My mother cried and an aunt from Kiev who had come to stay darted about the flat in terror; she wore a magnificent full petticoat. I remember being comforted, even pleased by the thought; what a good thing I had my seventeenth birthday a fortnight ago! That means that no one will dare to question my full responsibility. . . .

# 7

I SPENT only five months in prison, but I was a boy and they seemed like years to me; hours in confinement are different from those spent at liberty and the days can be extraordinarily long. At times it was very depressing, particularly at nightfall, when we could hear street noises; but I tried to keep a firm hold on myself: I saw prison as an examination for one's certificate of maturity.

Within half a year I made the acquaintance of various prisons: the Myasnitskaya police station, the Sushchevskaya, the Basmannaya and finally Butyrki. Each had its own customs.

All prisons at that time were full to capacity and for a week I was kept at Prechistensky police station waiting for a vacancy. The station was noisy. At night the drunks were brought in, beaten mercilessly and put into the 'drunk box'—that was what they called a large cage of the sort one sees at the zoo. I was guarded by policemen; often they would fall asleep sitting up and, on waking, blow their noses resoundingly and go on droning about their job being nothing but a pack of troubles. I had my own thoughts to occupy me: how stupid that I hadn't found a better hiding place for the military organisation's seal! I thought, too, about Asya: a pity we hadn't had time to say all the things we wanted to each other. I was taken to security headquarters; there, a mournful photographer with a goitre kept saying 'head a little higher . . . now the profile . . .' I had been keen on photography since childhood, liking to take pictures though not to be photographed myself, but this time I was delighted: it meant that I was being treated seriously.

They took me to Myasnitskaya police station. Conditions there were tolerable. The tiny cells contained two bunks. Some of the warders were good-natured and allowed us to take walks in the corridor, others abused us. I remember one; whenever I asked to be allowed to go to the lavatory, he would say: 'It doesn't matter, it can wait.' The prison head warder was a man of very poor education; when books were brought for the prisoners he would get cross because he couldn't distinguish the subversive ones from the others. In the State Archives I found one of his reports—he was informing the security department

that he had confiscated some books brought for me: the almanac *Zemlya*<sup>1</sup> and the works of Ibsen. Once he lost his temper altogether: 'Confounded cheek! Somebody's brought you a book about the knout. That's not allowed! You shan't get it!' (As I found out later, the book which so frightened the gaoler was a novel by Knut Hamsun.)

Another prisoner in Myasnitskaya was the Bolshevik V. Radus-Zenkovich. To me he seemed a veteran—he was thirty; it wasn't his first imprisonment, and he had been an émigré, too. My neighbour was another 'old man' with a touch of grey in his hair. Talking to him I tried not to divulge that I was seventeen. Once the chief warder brought me a literary almanac; I lent it to my cell-mate, who said to me an hour later: 'There's a message for you here.' Under some of the letters there were scarcely perceptible dots: the book had been sent by Asya. I blushed with happiness and shame; for the next few days I didn't dare to meet my cell-mate's eyes—all sentiment seemed to me an inadmissible weakness.

We exercised in a tiny yard amongst great snowdrifts. Then unexpectedly the snow turned grey and started settling—spring was on its way.

Sometimes we were taken to the public baths; those were wonderful days. We walked in the roadway under escort; the passers-by stared at the criminals, some in astonishment, others with pity. One little old woman crossed herself and thrust a five-kopek piece into my hand—I was nearest the pavement. At the baths we washed and steamed ourselves for a long time and felt as though we were free.

The prison was guarded outside by soldiers of the gendarmerie corps; they started conversations with us, saying that they respected us; after all, we weren't thieves but 'politicals'. Some agreed to take out letters. On 30th March I sent a letter to Asya. I must have recently received a note from her which had upset me, for I wrote: 'Only the realisation that it is important for the cause that I should have news from outside compels me to ask you to write to me.' My letter was found on Asya when she was searched and was put on the file. From this letter I conclude that in prison I went on living for the same things I had lived for when free. 'It's good to hear that the cause, having overcome such obstacles, is still making progress. Nevertheless, your letter confirms that my plan is right. The new club members may be

<sup>1</sup> 'The Earth', an anti-revolutionary literary journal (1908–1917).

very pleasant fellows, but I have considerable doubts of their Social-Democratic convictions and their organisational work will amount to childish games.' (As I re-read these lines I have to smile—a seventeen-year old denouncing the 'childish games' of some new members of a schools organisation!) I went on to write about general political matters: 'The Zamoskvoretsk further education society has been banned, the "labour union" has been suppressed; the Government, it seems, has decided to lock the door leading from the underground. It's up to us to break it open. But there's one thing we shouldn't forget—this is only an auxiliary measure, not the central one, which must consist of work within the underground movement.'

After this letter had been found at Asya's house, I was moved from Myasnit'skaya police station to Sushchev'skaya. The new prison seemed like paradise. A large number of men slept on planks in one big cell; you couldn't turn round without waking your neighbour. Everybody argued, shouted, sang 'Holy Baikal, glorious sea . . .' The head warder was a tippler with a liking for money, brandy, chocolates and Brocard's eau-de-cologne; he also liked the company of intelligent people and used to say 'you politicals are such bright lads'. Permission to receive visitors was a thing unknown to him: you had to wrap three roubles in a piece of paper. Anything at all could be sent to a prisoner, but the chief took whatever he particularly fancied. Sometimes, considerably the worse for drink, he would come into the cell, listen, smiling, to the arguments between the S.R.s and the S.D.s, and interject: 'How you do fight, don't you? As for me, I like you all, S.R.s, Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, the lot. You're clever men, but what's to become of Russia only the Lord God can say.' He had a crimson fleshy nose with black-heads and he always smelt of spirits.

Some of the prisoners protested: there's shouting all day long, impossible to read. We elected an 'elder', a bespectacled Menshevik, who solemnly announced that between 9 a.m. and noon noise was forbidden. At exactly 9 a.m. three anarchists started bawling hoarsely: 'Let the black banner signify the triumph of the working people . . .' They recognized no rules whatever. Even the chief was intimidated by them: 'Look here, you're overdoing it a bit, aren't you?' (When, in 1936, it fell to my lot to spend six months with the anarchists on the Aragon front, I often remembered the cell in Sushchev'skaya prison.)

However, disorder reigned not only in our cell but also inside the

Secret Political Police: men who had been arrested by chance and expected to be freed any day sat in the same cells with terrorists accused of armed raids, who were in danger of the gallows. A churchwarden stayed a week: he had been arrested in error, the police had been looking for somebody of the same name. He would tell each of us in great detail that he was a victim of chance and was entirely reliable even in his innermost thoughts; and he couldn't understand why we laughed. But when they came to tell him he could go home, he took fright and started saying that now he would certainly be brought back again—he had heard so many forbidden things in that week. An S.R. who had taken part in an armed raid of expropriation was awaiting execution. He was called Ivanov (I don't know whether that was his real name). He was simulating insanity. At first he confined himself to short violent fits, later he either changed his tactics or genuinely went off his head, in either case he drove us frantic day and night with bird-like screams, meaningless laughter and incoherent talk.

The investigator in charge of my case was a gendarmerie colonel named Vasilyev. He tried to gain my confidence, talked about the evils of the regime and told me that at heart he was on the side of progress. Sometimes he would flatter me, sometimes tease me with the irony of a mature and not unintelligent cynic. He was very anxious to know who was the author of the article *Two Years of the United Party*, whether there would soon be another split, what was Lenin's position. I answered his questions monosyllabically; various documents had been passed to me by various persons whom I refused to name. He would start conversations on general subjects: about Gorky, about the role of the younger generation, about Russia's future; he told me 'I've got a son of your age, a fool, interested in nothing—dances, girls, liqueurs. You, on the other hand, are a pleasure to talk to, you're an original young man and well-read into the bargain.' During one of these interrogations he started reading aloud a letter from Asya which had been taken from me at the time of my arrest. I became furious, shouting that this had nothing to do with the interrogation, that I wouldn't stand for such insults. He was extremely pleased, called me a 'young man of spirit' and offered me tea and biscuits, which I refused. He told me that a young girl had visited him and said that she was my second cousin on my mother's side and wanted to see me. 'I asked her what your mother's name was, and she didn't even know her patronymic. Why do you accept such fools in your organisation? I haven't

arrested her. You can guess, of course, whom I'm talking about. Yakovleva. Asya.' I controlled myself with difficulty and barely managed not to give myself away, saying indifferently that all this had nothing to do with my case.

The colonel lied to me. Soon after Asya had come to him asking to be allowed to see me, they searched her house; unfortunately my letter from prison was lying unopened on her desk—she hadn't had time to read and destroy it. On 8th April Asya was arrested on the illegal schools organisation charge and released on bail of 200 roubles a fortnight later.

Naturally, I hated Colonel Vasilyev, but he seemed to me an interesting character, a cunning investigator out of a novel: I had thought that all gendarmes were stupid, ignorant 'Hold-Your-Gobs'<sup>1</sup>.

The gendarmerie headquarters was in Kudrinskaya Square. I used to be taken there in a cab, with a gendarme at my side. I stared hungrily at the passers-by—what if I saw someone I knew? I could see workmen, dandies, schoolgirls, officers. Lilac was in bloom in the front gardens. Not a single familiar face.

At the last interrogation they told me that Ehrenburg, Oskolkov, Neumark, Lvova, Ivenson, Sokolov and Yakovleva would be indicted on a charge of membership in the R.S.D.L.P.'s schools organisation under paragraph I of Article 126. In addition, I would be charged under paragraph I of Article 102 with membership in a military organisation. Vasilyev explained, grinning: 'You personally ought to get six years, but they'll knock off a third because you're a minor. Then you'll be sent into administrative exile for life. You'll escape from there—I know your kind . . .'

Some prisoners, taking advantage of the Sushchevskaya chief's negligence, organised an escape; so far as I remember, four got away. For the first time I saw the head warder looking doleful. I don't know whether he kept his job, but we had to pay: they immediately transferred us to different prisons as 'accessories to the escape'.

When he saw me, the head warder of Basmannaya police cells bawled at once: 'Off with your trousers!' A 'personal search' began. From paradise I had come to hell. A powerful clout over the ear soon introduced me to the new regime. In Basmannaya we announced a

<sup>1</sup> *Derzhimorda*: Name of police chief in Gogol's *Inspector-General*.

<sup>2</sup> Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, 1898–1919.

hunger strike, demanding transfer to another prison. I remember begging a cell-mate to spit on a slice of bread—I was afraid I shouldn't be able to resist breaking off just the smallest bit.

They transferred me to a solitary cell in Butyrky prison; for me this was punishment. Of course, that's a matter of age; if anyone today offered me the choice between solitary and a common cell in Sushchevskaya, I wouldn't hesitate a minute; but at seventeen it isn't easy to kill time by oneself, more particularly without visits, letters or paper.

I tried knocking on the walls, but nobody answered. I wasn't allowed to go out for exercise. The bright light of a summer's day came in through the little window. The pail stank. I tried reciting poetry—the warden threatened to put me in the punishment cell. I demanded paper to draw up a petition and wrote a letter to gendarm-erie headquarters saying that 'Ilya Ehrenburg, confined in Moscow transit prison' no longer wanted to be behind bars: 'I request to be released from prison at once. If, however, it is intended to deprive me of my life or reason before the trial, I wish to be informed of it.' As I copy these lines I smile, but when I first wrote them I didn't feel at all like laughing. The petition was duly numbered and put on the file.

The prison doctor found that I was suffering from an acute form of neurasthenia. There were many things he didn't know; I went on thinking about various party affairs, about using the co-operative movement for party work, about certain workmen from Guzhon's factory who ought to be given more responsible duties; without paper, I composed an 'answer to Plekhanov'. I was thinking, too, that Asya had passed her school examination and was attending an Institute for Women's Higher Studies; it was unlikely that our lives would join. Nor were those the only things I thought about in prison: I began to think about life, about all those great and not entirely clear questions on which I had not had time to ponder when I was free. All in all, even prison is a good school provided you aren't flogged or tortured and provided you know that you've been put in prison by your enemies and that people of the same mind as yourself are remembering you with kindness.

'Get your things!' I thought I was being transferred to a new prison, but they held out a paper: 'Sign here.' They were letting me but pending the trial, under strict police surveillance; I was to leave Moscow without delay and proceed to Kiev.

I went out into Dolgorukovskaya and came to a dead stop. Everything may be forgotten, but never that. In peaceful times in a peaceful country a man grows up, goes to school, marries, works, has illnesses, grows old; he may go through the whole of life without understanding what freedom is; no doubt he always feels free to the extent to which it is proper for a respectable citizen with average powers of imagination to be free. Coming out of the prison gates I was struck motionless. Cabbies, a young fellow with a piano accordion, a booth, Chichkin's dairy, Savostyanov's bakery, girls, dogs, a dozen alleys, a hundred courtyards. You can go straight ahead or turn left or right . . . That was when I understood, once and for all, what freedom is.

(I have never been able to solve the mystery of Pushkin's line 'There's no happiness on earth, but there are peace and freedom'. I've often pondered on these words but have never understood them: life has changed. In 1949 I was sitting next to Samuel Marshak in the stalls of the Bolshoi Theatre; on the stage they were making speeches about Pushkin: it was a jubilee night. Then we went to the café at the corner of Kuznetsky Most. I asked Marshak what happiness it was that Pushkin had dreamt of besides peace and freedom. He did not answer.)

Meanwhile, I stood for a long time in Dolgorukovskaya, smiling. Then I went home to Ostozhenka, past Strasnaya Square; there I saluted Pushkin; I walked along the green boulevards, smiling the whole way.

## 8

I WAS soon expelled from Kiev and at the same time, for some reason, forbidden to stay in the provinces of Kiev or Kamenets-Podolsk. I got a temporary permit for Poltava: there I had an uncle, my mother's brother, a Liberal lawyer. The town, I thought, was nice: quiet streets, gardens with golden trees, little white houses; but strict police surveillance was capable of poisoning one's existence even in Poltava. My uncle received me cordially, of course, but I realised that the less often I came to see him, the safer he would feel. I started searching for lodgings; it was necessary to tell the landlords or landladies that I was under police surveillance. On hearing this they invariably turned me away—some rudely, others with a guilty look, saying that life was hard enough as it was. Finally I came to the house of a gentleman's tailor called Brave who, after consulting his wife, decided to let me rent a tiny room. I unpacked my books and notebooks and resolved to settle down for a long stay in Poltava. Naturally, I hoped to continue my underground work; I had the address of a worker comrade which I had been given in Kiev. For a week I crossed and re-crossed the town from one end to the other, trying to satisfy myself that I wasn't being followed by a *shpik*.

On 11th November 1908, Colonel Nesterov, chief of the Poltava gendarmerie headquarters, wrote: 'With regard to the R.S.D.L.P. organisation, I have to report that the following came within my sphere of observation in October': there follows a list including 'Ilya Grigoryev Ehrenburg, student'. I am sorry that I saw the report only half a century later. I should have been flattered by Nesterov taking me for a student.

It would be difficult for me to recollect all the details of my life in Poltava; once again, the police archives come to my aid. 'Copy of a letter, obtained through an agent, from Ilya Grigoryev Ehrenburg (under police surveillance) to Sima in Kiev, dated Poltava, 21st September 1908: "Dear comrade, here is some information about the state of the Poltava organizations. Two to three groups are in existence; we have no forces. All in all the situation is lamentable. To speak of a

conference under such conditions is ridiculous to say the least. For a long time they would not admit me, being a Bolshevik, and even now I remain on an 'exceptional basis'. Please send me several dozen copies of the *Southern Proletarian* and give me your news."

I don't remember Sima, but I do remember that in Poltava there was a Menshevik organisation and that, being a Bolshevik and a very young and exceptionally aggressive one at that, I gave a tremendous fright to a weedy Menshevik with a Chekhov beard, who kept saying: 'You can't hope to do everything at once, you know, really you can't. . . .' I did, however, manage to establish contact with three Bolsheviks working at the railway depot and to write two leaflets.

I had to report at the police station once a week, but 'strict surveillance' did not end there: policemen kept on coming round, waking me at dawn, knocking on my window at night. Once, coming home, I found a policeman in a winter hood sitting on my bed; he said reproachfully 'You're always out', picked up an exercise book off the desk—a précis of Kuno Fischer's *History of Philosophy*—tied my books up neatly with string and carted them away.

Brave the tailor, sobbing, begged me to give up the room: he had been told by the police that if he didn't get rid of me he would run into serious trouble. The humiliating search for lodgings started all over again. On the third or fourth day I found a comfortable room, and the landlord only laughed in response to the usual warning: 'I'm under surveillance myself.' He sympathized with the S.R.s, and at night we would argue about the role of the individual in history; sometimes our discussions were interrupted by another call from the police.

My uncle suggested that I should attend the district court—he was defending some poor wretch accused of theft. I started going to the court every day; the cases seemed to me far more interesting than novels. I knew that people lived badly, remembered the barracks of the Khamovniki brewery, had seen doss-houses, all-night cafés, drunkards, cruel and ignorant people, prison. But all that had been from the outside, and in the courtroom I caught a glimpse of people's hearts. Why had that quiet, modest peasant woman brutally murdered her next-door neighbour? Why had this old man stabbed to death the stepdaughter with whom he lived? Why did people have faith in this pockmarked ugly miracle-worker? Why were they full of darkness,

prejudice, violent passions which they themselves could not understand? I had known even before that there was a 'basis' and a 'superstructure', but in Poltava I first began to think about the ugliness and, at the same time, the persistence of the 'superstructure'. Before then, it had seemed to me that people could be changed within twenty-four hours—it would be enough for the proletariat to take power into its hands. Listening to the confessions of the accused, to the evidence of witnesses, I realized that things weren't as simple as that. I borrowed Chekhov's stories from the library.

I hung on in Poltava for only one month. The chief of police summoned me and said I would have to leave the town. 'Where do you intend to proceed?' I said the first thing that came into my head: 'To Smolensk.'

I did not know that I should be causing a lot of bother to the Smolensk authorities. Recently R. Ostrovskaya, a member of the Smolensk archives staff, sent me a reference. It appears that Colonel Nesterov told his opposite number in Smolensk, General Gromyko, that 'on 10th November, the former student Ilya Grigoryev Ehrenburg expressed his willingness to transfer his residence to Smolensk, and a temporary permit for that town was accordingly issued to him by the chief of police in Poltava'. At the same time Colonel Nesterov warned General Gromyko: 'The above-mentioned Ehrenburg, while residing in Poltava, succeeded in communicating with persons belonging to the local organization of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party.' On 24th November the chief of the Smolensk gendarmerie ordered that my arrival in that town should be reported to him at once. They waited for me a long time.

From Poltava I went to Kiev and stayed a week there without reporting. Each night I had to sleep somewhere else. One night I went to the address I had been given, rang the bell, knocked on the door, but all in vain. Perhaps I had taken down the wrong address; I don't know. I went along Bibikovsky Boulevard. It was cold; wet snow was falling. A young girl came walking the other way; she was wearing summer shoes. She spoke to me: 'Coming, darling?' I declined. An hour later we met again; she realised that I had nowhere to spend the night, took me to her heated room—'warm you up a bit'—gave me a packet of cigarettes (I didn't smoke, but never refused a cigarette) and went back to the boulevard to look for a client.

(Among prostitutes there are many with an untapped store of

tenderness. Fellini, the Italian film director, understood this when he made *Nights of Cabiria*. I have seen his latest film, *La Dolce Vita*, an extraordinarily cruel work; perhaps the only warm human thing in it is the Roman prostitute who takes a pair of rich neurotic lovers into her flat.)

In Moscow, the same difficulties awaited me. I could not go home and did not know where to turn. I had to look for acquaintances who had no connection with the underground movement, so-called 'sympathisers'. One of my former school-mates became extremely frightened when I called on him, started saying that I could ruin his whole life, offered me money and pushed me out into the hall. I spent the night at the house of a certain midwife; she was so afraid that she couldn't sleep and wouldn't allow me to sleep either: she was sure the whole time that someone was coming up the stairs, she wept and took ether-valerian drops. Soon I had exhausted the stock of places where I could stay. I spent a night in the streets. I walked about and thought: this is my town, here is a house I used to visit, yet there's no place for me. Foolish thoughts, justified only by youth.

What followed was even more foolish: I went to the gendarmerie headquarters and declared that I preferred prison to 'strict surveillance'. Colonel Vasilyev laughed for a long time; then he said: 'Your father has made an application asking that you should be allowed to go abroad for a brief period for medical treatment.' I thought the colonel was making fun of me, but he showed me a document about what is called in legal language 'a variation of administrative restrictions'. The document said that police surveillance had been found inadequate and that 'as a guarantee of my appearance in court' my father must deposit bail of 500 roubles for me. (For Kora Iverson they took 400, for Neumark 300, for Yakovleva 200 and for Oskolkov 100. I don't know who fixed the tariff and by what considerations they were guided.)

The text of the indictment was handed to the accused eighteen months later, on 21st May 1910. I was then living in Paris and writing poems about medieval knights. I was officially informed that my departure abroad had been illegal since 'the law excludes the possibility of granting permission to accused persons to reside abroad, i.e. outside the jurisdiction of the courts.' My father was told that 'by virtue of Article 427 of the Code of Criminal Laws' the bail he had deposited would be 'converted into capital for the establishment of places of confinement'.

In September 1911 a court of law heard the case of the schools organisations; the cases against Ehrenburg and Neumark were set aside. The defence pointed out, not without reason, that the ring-leaders had escaped. Oskolkov was condemned to eight months' imprisonment; the others were acquitted.

I did not like the idea of going abroad: everything I lived for was in Russia. I consulted one of the comrades; he said: 'Go. You ought to fill some gaps in your political education. Lenin isn't in Geneva any more, but in Paris. Go to Paris, there you'll find Savchenko, Ludmila . . . .'

I decided to go to Paris for a year and then to return to Russia on an illegal footing. 'Only to Paris,' I told my parents. My mother cried; she would have liked me to go to Germany and attend school there; in Paris there were many temptations, *femmes fatales*, her boy might go to the bad.

I left with a heavy heart and a still heavier suitcase—I had filled it with my favourite books. I wore a winter coat, a fur cap and lined boots.

On 7th December 1908 General Gromyko informed Colonel Nesterov in Poltava that 'Ilya Grigoryev Ehrenburg has not so far arrived in Smolensk'. On that very day Ilya Grigoryev, leaning out of a third-class carriage window, was staring suspiciously at the green grass and little houses on the outskirts of Paris.

## 9

I WELL remember the December day when I left the Gare du Nord for the noisy dirty station square. The wind surprised me—it carried a breath of the sea; I began to feel joyful and restless. I deposited my suitcase in the left-luggage office and felt free at once. True, my dress was unsuitable, but no one paid any attention to me and within the first few hours I realised that in this city it was possible to live unnoticed: nobody cared.

I went into a bar. Red-faced cab-drivers in top hats were standing at the zinc counter; they were drinking mysterious drinks, purple and green. I remembered the Moscow cabbies and felt a pang: catch this lot talking about oats! I ordered coffee. The *patronne* asked me something which I didn't understand. (I was convinced that I could speak French: I had learnt it at school and had been given private lessons; it turned out, however, that I knew a few hundred words which Racine used in his tragedies, but none of those most necessary in life.) I was given black coffee in a wineglass and a little glass of rum. I was frightened, but drank it.

I knew that the Russian émigrés lived near the Latin Quarter and asked a policeman how I could get there. He pointed to an omnibus: Paris turned out to possess our own horse-tram, except that it had two decks and didn't run on rails. I climbed up to the top deck and sat down next to the driver; he held a long whip in his hand. He kept falling asleep; a dead cigarette stub trembled on his lower lip. Whenever he woke up he began to sing; as he woke up many times, I finally understood the first words of the song: 'A gipsy's heart is a volcano . . .' He was about sixty. To me he seemed not just old but ancient, like the ash-coloured houses of Paris.

The ride was long—from one end of the city to the other. We crossed the *grands boulevards*; at that time this was the centre. I suddenly realised that here not only the way of life but even the calendar was different: it was the twentieth of December, soon it would be Christmas, that was why there were advertisement posters everywhere—Christmas presents, gala suppers. On the boulevards there

was an enormous number of stalls, some selling all kinds of trash, others with large table games that mystified me: roulette boards.

Singers with sheets of music stood at street corners; they sang melancholy tunes; bystanders, crowding round, joined in the singing. The pavements were piled high with beds, sideboards, cupboards: these were furniture shops. In fact all kinds of goods were out in the street: meat, cheeses, oranges, hats, saucepans. I was amazed by the number of *pissoirs*; on them was written 'Meunier Chocolate is Best', and below you could see the red trousers of soldiers. The wind was cold but people weren't hurrying: they weren't in fact going anywhere but just taking a stroll.

The cafés had terraces and braziers glowed on many of these; venerable old men sat beside them. I felt like writing at once to Asya, to my sisters, to Nadya Lvova, that in Paris they heated the streets. No one would believe it.

In the boulevard de Sebastopol I saw a steam tram: it was hooting tragically. Cabbies shouted at their horses and cracked their whips. There were no droshkys—all the cabs were carriages, like the Moscow Governor-General's. I saw a couple inside one of the carriages—they were kissing; I quickly looked away so as not to embarrass them. Horseless carriages—motor cars—sometimes turned into the street; they hooted and clattered, and the horses shied in terror.

I gave the conductor a silver coin; he bit it and, seeing my astonishment, smiled gaily. I had never before seen so many people in the streets. Moscow seemed to me a memory of sweet, peaceful childhood. Newspaper vendors yelled frantically: *La Presse! La Patrie!* I thought that something important had happened—perhaps Germany had declared war? Or had the S.R.s thrown a bomb at Stolypin? Of course, individual terrorism could decide nothing, but it was a pleasant thought all the same. A newspaper seller jumped on the omnibus while it was moving. I bought a paper. On the front page there was a large picture of a man I did not know. I studied the headlines for a long time and gathered that this man had killed his mistress, put the body in a trunk and dispatched it by slow train to Nancy.

I did not know where I should get off for the Latin Quarter, and finally asked the driver. He laughed and said 'Get off here'. We were at the Place Denfert-Rochereau. In the middle of the square stood a monument: an angry lion looked straight at me; I read the inscription on the plinth and learnt that it commemorated the defence of Belfort

against the Prussians. I thought with pleasure that I should see the Mur des Fédérés. In Moscow I had once arranged a lecture by V. P. Potemkin for students and schools; he had spoken well and ended with the words 'The Commune is dead, long live the Commune!' The passers-by merged in my imagination with the heroes of Anatole France's *Les Dieux ont soif*, with the lion-like courage of the defenders of Belfort and with the Communards of whom I knew from Lissagaray's book.

But it was necessary to find a room. There were very many hotels: I chose the one with the smallest sign: no doubt it would be cheap. The landlady gave me a brass candle-holder covered with solidified drops of wax, a large key and a tiny towel like a table-napkin. I held out my passport, but she said it didn't interest her. The room contained a very large iron bedstead which occupied nearly the whole space. There was a stone floor. I took the window for a door leading on to a balcony, but there turned out to be no balcony; I saw that all the houses had similar windows—starting directly at floor level. But there was no table in the room. Strange—even in tailor Brave's tiny room there had been a table. The room was cold. I asked the landlady whether it would be possible to light a fire. She replied that this was very expensive and promised to put a hot brick into my bed at night. (Next day I decided nevertheless to treat myself to a fire, and the handyman brought me a bag of coal. I did not know how to light the fire—this was hard coal; I put in some newspaper, wood chips, the whole thing burned away quickly but the damned coal would not light; I only succeeded in getting my face black and again went to sleep in a cold room.)

To sit indoors was silly. I postponed the search for Savchenko and Ludmila till the next day and went wandering about Paris. The men wore bowlers, the women huge hats with feathers. On the café terraces lovers kissed unconcernedly—I even stopped looking away. Students walked along the boulevard St Michel, they walked in the road, holding up the traffic, but no one dispersed them. At first I thought it was a demonstration—but no, they were simply enjoying themselves. Roasted chestnuts were being sold. Rain began to fall. The grass in the Luxembourg Gardens was a tender green. In December! I was very hot in my lined coat. (I had left my boots and fur cap at the hotel.) There were bright posters everywhere. All the time I felt as though I were at the theatre.

I have lived a long time in Paris; various events, snatches of conversation have become confused in my memory; but I remember well my first day in Paris: the city electrified me. The most astonishing thing is that it has remained unchanged; Moscow is unrecognisable, but Paris is still the same. When I come to Paris now I feel inexpressibly sad—the city is the same, it is I who have changed; it is painful for me to walk along the familiar streets: they are the streets of my youth. Of course, the *fiacres*, the horse buses, the steam tram disappeared long ago; you rarely see a café with red velvet or leather settees; only a few *pissoirs* are left—the rest have gone into hiding below ground. But these, after all, are minor details. People still live out in the streets, lovers kiss wherever they please, no one takes any notice of anyone. The old houses haven't changed—what's another half a century to them, at their age it makes no difference. Say what you will, the world has changed and so the Parisians, too, must be thinking of many things of which they had no inkling in the old days: the atom bomb, mass production methods, Communism. But with their new thoughts they still remain Parisians, and I am sure that if an eighteen-year-old Soviet lad comes to Paris today he will raise his hands in astonishment, as I did in 1908: 'A theatre!'

The next day I went to the Latin Quarter. In the boulevard St Michel I started listening to the conversations of passers-by: as soon as I heard Russian spoken I would ask where the émigrés' library was; there they would certainly be able to give me Savchenko's and Ludmila's address. The search took me half a day. The library was in the avenue des Gobelins, at the far end of a dirty courtyard. I went up a spiral staircase to a room like a long shed. It had shelves of books, Russian newspapers lay about; I met the librarian, Comrade Miron (Imbert). He was a Menshevik and this upset me; however, I soon realised that he had only one worry, namely that readers should not steal the library books. He delivered a long lecture to me on how to treat books, and I promised never to turn back corners nor to make notes in the margins. (All the same, he made a dig at my expense—saying that it was above all certain Bolsheviks who liked to write in library books.) He was a myopic, quiet, well-meaning person. Every night he went to a small brasserie in the rue Broca where he ate sausages and worked on compiling a register of Russian publications abroad. He did not know where Savchenko and Ludmila were living, but said that some Bolsheviks from the co-operation group would turn up shortly. And so it

was: two hours later I was already at Savchenko and Ludmila's flat. They had two small rooms and a kitchen with a gas stove; camp beds stood in the rooms. Everything reminded one of student lodgings at Kozikhi or some such place. The only thing that intrigued me was the gas stove. Savchenko was a motherly woman of about thirty (to me she seemed old). She took me under her tutelage at once, said that living in an hotel was expensive and that tomorrow she would go with me and find a furnished room, it wasn't difficult—a yellow notice was always hung outside the front door. But tonight they would take me to a meeting of the Bolshevik group—Lenin would be there . . .

We had supper. I fidgeted all the time, looked at the clock: mustn't be late! Of course, Savchenko and Ludmila were telling me astounding things about Paris, but there was only one reason why I had come there: to see Lenin.

# 10

THE Bolshevik group met at a café in the avenue d'Orléans, not far from the Belfort lion. Upstairs there was a small hall; as is the custom in Paris, the use of this hall was free; clients had to pay only for their coffee or beer. We were among the first to arrive. I asked Savchenko what I should order; she said: 'Grenadine. We all drink grenadine.' It was true: everybody had got a glass of bright red sickly syrup, to which they added soda water. Only Lenin ordered a mug of beer. (Afterwards I was often told how surprised the waiters were: revolutionaries, yet they drink grenadine! The French add the syrup to strong drinks which are too bitter; and on Sundays, when the whole family comes to the café, small children are given grenadine without charge.)

There were about thirty people at the meeting; I kept my eyes on Lenin. He was dressed in a dark suit with a stiff white collar and looked very respectable. I cannot remember what he spoke about, but being a fairly aggressive youth I asked for the floor and challenged some point. He answered me gently, not putting me in my place but explaining to me: I had failed to understand this or that. Ludmila told me at once that I had done a foolish thing. When the meeting was over, Lenin came up to me: 'Are you from Moscow?' I explained to him that I had worked in the Moscow organisation until January, had been arrested, had tried living in Poltava and had found some comrades there. Lenin told me to come and see him.

I found the house in a little street near the Parc Montsouris (I have ascertained now that it was the rue Beaunier). I stood for a long time at the door, not daring to ring; not a trace was left of my recent aggressiveness. The door was opened by Krupskaya. Lenin was working: he sat, deep in thought, over a long sheet of paper, his eyes narrowed a little.

I told him about the breaking-up of the schools organisation, about the article *Two Years of the United Party*, about the situation in Poltava. He listened attentively, sometimes with a barely noticeable smile; it seemed to me that he could guess that I was only a youngster and this

confused my thoughts. I said that I could remember by heart some addresses to which the newspaper could be sent. Krupskaya took them down. I tried to leave but Lenin held me back; he started asking me questions—what was the general mood among young people, which writers did they read most, were the *Znanie*<sup>1</sup> books popular, what plays had I seen in Moscow—at Korsch's, at the Arts. He paced about the room, I sat on a stool. Krupskaya said it was time for lunch; I thought I had stayed too long, but they made me stay and gave me something to eat. I was struck by the order in the flat: the books stood on shelves, Lenin's desk was tidy; it wasn't like the rooms of my Moscow friends nor like the flat where Savchenko and Ludmila lived. Lenin said several times to Krupskaya: 'He's come straight from there . . . He knows what the young people are interested in . . .'

I was fascinated by his head. I remembered this fifteen years later, when I saw Lenin in his grave. For a long time I looked at that amazing skull: it made one think not of anatomy but of architecture.

(Many years later, after Lenin's death, I read Krupskaya's memoirs. She recounts that Lenin read my first novel. "You know, that's Shaggy Ilya" (Ehrenburg's nickname), he kept saying triumphantly. "He's done a good job." I went to see Lenin at the very beginning of 1909; I did not know that I had spoken to him again, through the printed page, in 1922 or 1923, shortly before his death, when he was reading my *Julio Jurenito*.)

I heard Lenin several times at meetings; he spoke calmly, without rhetoric or emotional appeal; he slurred his 'r's' a little; sometimes he smiled. His speeches were like a spiral: afraid that people wouldn't understand him he returned to a thought he had already expressed, never repeating it but adding something new. (Some of those who copied his manner of speaking used to forget that a spiral is like a circle and yet unlike. A spiral progresses.)

Lenin followed French political life attentively, studied its history, its economics, knew the living conditions of the Paris workers. He not only spoke but was able to write articles in French.

In May 1909 I went to a demonstration at the Mur des Fédérés. Participants in the Commune marched at the head; there were still many of them then and they marched smartly. To me they seemed incredibly old—after all, it had all happened thirty-eight years ago! At the Wall I

<sup>1</sup> 'Knowledge', a progressive publishing house, 1898-1919.

saw Lenin; he was standing among a group of Bolsheviks and looking at the wall—the shades of the *Fédérés* stepped out of the stone.

I have seen Lenin, too, at the Bibliothèque Ste Geneviève, on a bench in the Parc Montsouris among the old women and children, at the workers' theatre in the rue Gaité where the singer Montégus sang revolutionary songs.

In the heat of the polemic against the Socialist Revolutionaries who ignored the laws of social development, I naturally denied any role to the individual in history. A few years ago I paused to think about a sentence in a letter by Engels: 'Marx and I ourselves are partly to blame for the fact that young people sometimes attach more importance to the economic side than they should. In arguing with our opponents we have had to emphasize the main principle, which they denied, and there wasn't always enough time, place and opportunity to give their due to the other elements participating in the reaction.' Lenin's example has put many things back in their proper place.

When I came to see Lenin, the concierge said to me severely: 'Wipe your feet.' Did she have the faintest idea who her lodger was? Did the waiter at the café in the avenue d'Orléans realize that in eight years' time the entire world would be talking about the gentleman who ordered a mug of beer? Did the other readers in the library guess that the man neatly copying figures and names from a book would alter the course of history, that tens of thousands of authors would write about him in all the languages of the world? And even I, who at that time regarded Lenin with awe, could I visualise that before me stood a man who would be bound up with the birth of a new era for mankind?

I shall never forget the four nights which preceded Lenin's funeral—the nights when Moscow said farewell to Lenin. There was a bitter frost; bonfires were lit in the squares. As they entered the Hall of Columns, grown men, the Red Guards of yesterday, wept like children. A miracle happened: in those four nights history was made plain to everyone; that which only a short time ago had seemed of the ephemeral stuff of newspaper reports had all at once become granite—everyone suddenly understood what it was that Lenin had created.

In life Lenin was simple, democratic, mindful of his comrades. He did not make fun even of an impudent schoolboy. Such simplicity is only found in great men; and often, when thinking about Lenin, I have asked myself: perhaps the cult of personality is alien, even distasteful, to really great personalities?

Lenin was a great and complex person. During the turbulent years of the Civil War, after hearing Isai Dobrovein play a Beethoven sonata, Lenin said to Gorky: 'I know nothing better than the *Appassionata*. I could listen to it every day. Wonderful, more than human music. I always think with pride, perhaps naïve pride: see what miracles men can perform!' And, narrowing his eyes, he added ruefully, 'But I can't listen to music often, it plays on my nerves, it makes me want to say silly, tender things and stroke the heads of people who, living in a dirty hell, can yet create such beauty. But today one mustn't stroke anybody's head—they'd bite off your hand, one's got to hit them on the head, hit them mercilessly, although ideally we are against any violence towards human beings. Yes, yes—it's a hellishly difficult job.'

I have copied this long quotation from Gorky's memoirs because it is so closely linked with my life and thoughts—no, the pronoun is wrong: with our age, our destiny.

# 11

It HAS fallen to my lot to see many kinds of different emigrations—left-wing and right-wing, rich and poor, self-confident and lost; I have seen Russians, Germans, Spaniards, French. Some émigrés sighed for the past, others lived for the future. But émigrés of different persuasions, different nationalities, different periods have one thing in common: a rejection of the foreign country where they find themselves through no will of their own, an acute nostalgia for their own country, the need to live in a narrow circle of their compatriots and the consequent inevitable dissensions.

The old Bolshevik, A. S. Shapovalov became an émigré after the 1905 revolution. He describes how Belgian customs shocked his companions: 'To hell with your Belgium and its famous freedom! It turns out that after 10 p.m. you can't walk about in boots in your own room, nor sing, nor shout.' Long before, describing the life of the émigrés in London, Herzen wrote that 'the Frenchman can never resign himself to the "slavery" of public houses being closed on Sundays.'

It is difficult to uproot fully grown plants; they become diseased and often perish. In Russia now they practise winter transplanting: a tree is dug up while it is in a dormant condition. In spring it comes back to life in a new place. A good method, especially as a tree has no memory.

I remember Miguel Unamuno in Paris—he was an émigré at the time of Primo de Rivera; he used to sit in the Rotonde cutting out paper dragons and bulls. Later other Spaniards came and joined his table, and Unamuno would tell them that in France there had never been, was not and never could be a Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance. (He looked like Don Quixote himself.) I remember Ernst Toller, suffocating in London fog and hypocrisy; he could not bear life in exile and killed himself. Jean-Richard Bloch spent the war years in Moscow; a man of great will-power, he tried to hide his nostalgia, but when he spoke of France his melancholy eyes became even more melancholy; on the wall of his room at the National hotel he had stuck a scrap of blue paper from a packet of French cigarettes, smoked

long ago. Pablo Neruda, large and immobile, sat in a Prague hotel room looking like an ancient Aztec god; but he had only to begin talking about the sea shells of the Pacific coast and his face grew animated; he would talk with indignation about the misdeeds of the dictator of Chile, with indignation and yet with tenderness. The dictator was a Chilean after all. In Paris in 1946 I went to see A. M. Remizov, gravely ill and bent like a stunted tree. He was lonely, living in poverty and distress. Why had he become an émigré? He himself would hardly have been able to explain it. He said that in his dreams he always saw Russia, old friends, the Petersburg of his student years. And in his room there were Russian pictures, Russian animals and (of course) Russian devils.

In 1932 I wrote concerning Russian émigrés: 'A life goes on around them with which they have essentially no connection. They live in Paris as in the miserable garret of a luxury hotel. They have forgotten how to speak Russian yet have never mastered French. They weep when they see *Vanyushin's Children* at a tiny Russian theatre. They hum Vertinsky's songs. They attend the gatherings of various home town associations. They cannot even relinquish the old calendar, and see in the New Year on 13th January. At one Russian house I saw a samovar: they heated the water for it on a gas stove.'

Between the pre-revolutionary emigration and the White emigration there was all the difference in the world. The Russian refugees who reached Paris after the revolution settled in the bourgeois districts—Passy, Auteuil—whereas the revolutionary émigrés lived at the other end of the town, in the working-class districts: Gobelins, Italie, Mont-rouge. The Whites opened restaurants called 'Boyar's Bower' or 'Troika'; some owned the places, some waited at table and others danced Russian dances to amuse the French. But the revolutionary émigrés went to French workers' meetings; Socialist Revolutionaries argued with Social Democrats, *otzovisty*,<sup>1</sup> with Leninists. Different people, different lives.

I refer to certain feelings common to all human beings who find themselves in a foreign country against their will only in order to explain my emotional state when, in January 1909, I at last rented a furnished room in the rue Denfert-Rochereau, unpacked the books I

<sup>1</sup> Those who demanded the recall of all Socialists from elected bodies as a protest after the reaction of 1907.

had brought with me, bought a spirit stove and a kettle and recognised that I was to stay in this city for a long time. Paris enchanted me, of course, but I was vexed with myself: what was there to be so excited about? I was no longer a child, I had been transplanted without a clump of soil and I was sick. A tourist can admire new scenery, new customs: after all, he has come in order to see things; but the émigré spurns even while he admires. There's no spring here, I thought in anguish. How can the French understand what the first cracking of the ice means, the removal of the double windows, the first snowdrops piercing the ice-crust? In Paris, the grass was green even in winter. There was no winter at all, and I sorrowfully remembered the snow-drifts in Zachatyevsky Lane, Nadya, the little cloud of mist round her lips, the warmth of her hand inside her muff. Dear Lord, how many flowers there are in France! Fragrant wistaria crept over the walls, in every front garden there were wonderful roses. And yet, looking at the meadows of Meudon and Clamart, I was sad: where are the flowers? Like a prayer I repeated: coltsfoot, cowslip, vetch.

The French seemed to me too polite, insincere and calculating. No one here would ever suddenly open his heart to a chance companion, no one would drop in 'because he had seen the light on'; everyone drank, but no one would drink for a whole week out of sorrow, no one would sacrifice his last shirt for drink. No one, probably, would hang himself.

Vitaly hanged himself. They said he had fallen deeper and deeper into trouble and debt, had passed off other people's poems for his own; he had often said to me that Paris 'made him sick'. Sometimes I went to see Tamara Nadolskaya, a thin girl with sleepwalker's eyes. We talked about Russia, important emotions, the purpose of life. She lived in an attic; through the little window you could see the vast, strange city. She often said that nothing in life had proved to be as she had imagined. She threw herself into the street from that little window. I had known Tanya Rashevskaya in Moscow: she was the sister of my school friend Vasya; she had been in prison, had gone to Paris, become a medical student, married a handsome Rumanian; then she poisoned herself. Her mother came from Moscow for the funeral. A priest was talked into giving her a Christian burial; everyone held a candle, the deacon sang 'And forgiving all transgressions . . .'

Sometimes I went to lectures—we called them '*referaty*'. We met in a large hall in the avenue de Choisy; the hall was like a barn; in winter the audience used to heat it themselves. Lunacharsky talked about

Rodin. Kollontay exposed bourgeois morality. Sometimes the anarchists would break in and it came to blows.

When I began writing poetry Lunacharsky encouraged me, saying that it is possible to be a revolutionary and love poetry at the same time. For me he was a bridge linking my adolescence with my new dreams. In memoirs about Lunacharsky one reads of his 'immense erudition', 'all-round culture'. I was struck by something different: he was not a poet, he was engrossed in political activity, but an extraordinary love of art burned in him; he seemed always to be tuned in to receive those subtle waves which escape the ears of many others. Later, on the rare occasions I met him, I tried to argue: his opinions were alien to me. But he was far from attempting to force his view on other people. The October Revolution put him in the post of People's Commissar of Education and there is no denying that he proved a good shepherd. 'I have said dozens of times that the Commissariat of Education must be impartial in its attitude to different trends of artistic life. So far as questions of form are concerned, the taste of the People's Commissar and all other representatives of authority must be left out of account. All persons and groups in art must be given freedom of development. No one movement, armed either with acquired traditional fame or with fashionable success, must be allowed to suppress another.' It is a pity that people with authority or interest in the world of art have very rarely remembered these sensible words. In 1933 Lunacharsky was appointed ambassador to Madrid. He got as far as Paris and fell ill. I came to see him at his hotel. He realised that death was near and talked about it. His wife tried to distract him, but he replied calmly: 'Death is a serious business, it forms part of life. One must know how to die with dignity . . .' After a silence he added: 'Art, now—it can teach even that . . .'

I had very little money and thought that treating oneself to a meal wasn't worth while: one could get a cup of coffee and five *croissants* at the zinc counter. Nevertheless, I used sometimes to go to a Russian canteen: it wasn't hunger that drove me there but nostalgia. I remember two canteens: the Socialist Revolutionary one in the rue de la Glacière (it was called that because some S.R.s, relatives of the owners of 'Vysotsky's Tea', donated money for feeding the émigrés), and the non-party one in the rue Pascal. Both were cheap, dirty and crowded, with nasty food. The waiter shouted to the cook: '*Un borshch et bitochki avec kasha!*' A red-haired S.R. woman repeated hysterically

that unless they gave her a battle mission she would kill herself. Grisha, a Bolshevik, was outraged: passing the Café d'Harcourt he had seen Martov sitting inside—that's how opportunists go to pieces!

Sometimes a dance would be arranged; the proceeds went to Russia towards propaganda expenses. French actors were invited; the buffet did brisk business; many got drunk quickly and sang unsteadily in chorus: 'Like deeds of treason, like a tyrant's conscience, black is the autumn night . . .' Here, too, accounts were settled: the emigration was a tiny island where one lived both in cramped quarters and with ill-feeling<sup>1</sup>.

In prison I had realized that I knew nothing. Now I enrolled as an external student at the *Haute Ecole des Etudes Sociales*. The lectures seemed to me colourless and lacking in content, but I made notes neatly in an exercise book. Soon I found that I could get far more out of books than from lectures: another period of avid reading began.

I got my books out of the Turgenev Library. Its story is a dramatic one. In 1875 a 'Literary and Musical Matinée' was held in Paris with Turgenev, Gleb Uspensky, Pauline Viardot and the poet Kurochkin taking part. Turgenev sold tickets, saying that 'the money received would be used to found a Russian reading-room for indigent students.' He gave books to the library, some with his own marginal notes. Two generations of revolutionary émigrés used the 'Turgenevka' and added bibliographical rarities to it. After the revolution the library went on existing, only its readers changed. At the start of the Second World War Russian émigré writers handed their archives over to the Turgenev Library for safe-keeping. One of Hitler's closest associates, the Balt Rosenberg, who was regarded as a connoisseur of 'Rossica', removed the Turgenev Library to Germany. In 1945, just before the end of the war, an officer whom I did not know brought me a letter I had written in 1913 to M. O. Zetlin (the poet Amari). The officer told me that at a German railway station he had found some rifled crates: Russian books, manuscripts and letters were lying on the ground. He had picked up a few of Gorky's letters and, seeing my signature on a faded sheet of paper, had decided to give me pleasure. Such was the end of the Turgenev Library.

Sometimes I looked in at the party library in the avenue des Gobe-

<sup>1</sup> A Russian saying, *ν tesnote da ne ν obide*: 'cramped quarters don't matter so long as there's no ill-feeling.'

lins; you could meet people there you knew. In a half-lit barn, amid cobwebs, newspapers and battered hats, one argued for hours on end, paying no attention to Miron who protested: 'But, comrades, this is a library!' Sometimes there would be new arrivals from Petersburg or Moscow; we used to bombard them with questions. The news was not encouraging; the secret police were excelling themselves, one 'pinch' followed another. There was a lot of talk about Azef. Of course, I had never agreed with the Socialist Revolutionaries; still, I was attracted by romanticism—Kalyayev, Sazonov—and suddenly it transpired that a fat, disgusting individual had been deciding the fates of both the revolutionaries and the Tsarist Ministers<sup>1</sup>.

Endless discussions still went on at the party meetings. Recently I read in S. Gopner's memoirs that Lenin used to speak about the fruitlessness of émigré discussions, where arguments went on among people who had taken up their positions long ago. I was angry with myself: why was it that such discussions had interested me in Moscow, while here, where there were so many experienced party workers, I felt bored? I began attending meetings more rarely.

I tried going to a French Socialist meeting. Jaurès made a speech; he spoke wonderfully and I felt I was hearing something new (later I understood that this was a matter of oratorical talent). He said that labour, fraternity and humanism were stronger than the self-interest of the ruling class; he waved his arms and, deeply moved, undid his stiff collar. It was unbearably hot in the hall. After Jaurès' speech, a children's choir sang about the sufferings of a consumptive youth who would not live to see the sunrise. Then a fat, sweating woman sang some ribald couplets about losing her stays in a Minister's office. Everybody cheered up. A band stepped on to the platform; the benches were hastily pushed aside. There was going to be dancing. The Russian eighteen-year-old did not dance. He paced the ancient streets of Paris sadly and thought: humanism, proletariat—and, suddenly, a pair of stays!

I liked Paris but did not know how to take it. I went to an exhibition and was horrified. I hadn't the faintest notion about art; in my room in

<sup>1</sup> Azef was perhaps the most remarkable double agent of all time. He presided over the terrorist committee of the S.R.s, designating persons for assassination and organising the assassinations, and at the same time was employed by the Tsarist secret police to denounce the assassins.

Moscow there had been postcard reproductions of 'What Breadth!' and 'Island of the Dead'. I thought that paintings must have complicated subjects, and here artists painted a house, a tree, even worse—apples.

At the Comédie Française the famous actor Mounet-Sully was appearing as Oedipus Rex. I recognized only the Moscow Art Theatre: I thought that everything on the stage ought to be as in real life. Mounet-Sully stood motionless on one spot, then took a few steps, stopped again and roared like a wounded lion: 'O how dark is our life!' Some years later I understood that he was a great actor, but at the time I did not know what art was and could not resist laughing aloud. I was sitting in the gallery among true theatre-lovers and before I knew what had happened I was out in the street with aching ribs.

At night I wrote long letters to Moscow; the replies were brief; I had dropped out of the game, become an outsider. A little later, when I began to think myself a poet, I confessed in pale, schoolboy verse: 'How I long for Russian winter, how for ever out of reach seems to me the first snow and the winged course of the sledge!' 'How joyful is my country's spring, the clouds in the wan sky and this great, swollen river bursting its bonds!' 'So much that is near and dear in the words Arbat, Dorogomilovo . . .' Addressing Russia, I wrote: 'If ever I should see again two pines and a signpost saying "Verzhbolovo", a wan, gentle spring day, melting snow and the bitterness of our villages . . . I shall understand how poor and small I am beside thee, how in these years I have lost myself . . .' The verses are bad, it is embarrassing to copy them out, but they are a fairly accurate expression of my emotional state at that period.

I remember the year 1949 when some people called me a 'cosmopolitan'. Indeed, a better target would have been difficult to find: apart from anything else, I had lived long in Paris, both by necessity and by choice. At that time many people were fond of talking about 'passportless tramps'—one's domiciliary record appeared to be virtually decisive. Yet the sense of home becomes particularly acute when one is abroad; and you see many things more clearly, too. Heine wrote the *Wintermärchen* in Paris; Turgenev wrote *Fathers and Sons* there; Gogol worked on *Dead Souls* in Rome; Tyutchev wrote about Russia in Munich, Romain Rolland about France in Switzerland, Ibsen about Norway in Germany, Strindberg about Sweden in France; *The Artamonov* was written in Italy; and so on.

I remember somebody once saying: it is time Ehrenburg realized he is eating Russian bread, not Parisian chestnuts. In Paris, when times were hard, I did, indeed, buy hot chestnuts in the street, from an Auvergnat reeking of smoke: they cost only two sous, warmed one's hands and were deceptively filling. I ate the chestnuts and thought about Russia—not her loaves.

## 12

I BEGAN writing poetry in the spring of 1909, to my own surprise: I still attended political '*referaty*' and lectures at the Haute Ecole.

At a meeting of the R.S.D.L.P. co-operation group I met Liza. She had come from Petersburg and was reading medicine at the Sorbonne. Liza had a passionate love of poetry; she read Balmont, Bryusov, Blok, aloud to me. I had made fun of Nadya Lvova when she said that Blok was a great poet, but I did not dare to contradict Liza. Coming home after seeing her, I would mutter to myself: 'The bright wind is hushed, grey evening falls . . .' Why was the wind bright? I could not explain it to myself, but I felt that it really was bright. I started borrowing books by contemporary poets from the Turgenev Library and suddenly realized that in poetry you can say what cannot be said in prose. There were very many things I had to say to Liza.

I wrote my first poem in a day and a night without stopping: it turned out to be very difficult. I knew I had a poor French vocabulary; but I was writing poetry in Russian! Yet I was conscious all the time of how appallingly few words I had at my command. At last I plucked up courage to show my poems to Liza; afraid of a harsh verdict, I said it was the work of a friend. Liza proved a severe critic: my friend did not know how to write, the poems were imitative—one was in the style of Balmont, another of Lermontov, a third of Nadson; in short, my friend would have to put in a lot of work.

I tore up everything I had written and resolved never again to return to poetry. I would be a revolutionary, perhaps a journalist or choose another profession—poetry was not for me. To make the resolution was easy, to carry it out proved impossible. I suddenly felt that poetry had taken root within me, it could not be driven out, and I went on writing. It was two months before I showed any more poems to Liza. She said: 'Your friend's writing better now . . .' The conversation turned to something else, then all at once, quite negligently, she said: 'You know, one of your poems was rather good.' It turned out that she had seen through the ruse from the start.

I was living near the zoo. Sea lions barked after dark. I wrote poems

all night, bad imitative poems, but I was happy—it seemed to me that I had found my way.

Liza went to Petersburg for the holidays. Suddenly I had a telegram from her: the journal *Severnye Zori*<sup>1</sup> had accepted a poem of mine. I was beside myself with joy: I must be a real poet!

I became bolder and sent some poems to the journal *Apollo*<sup>2</sup>. A reply soon came from its editor, the art critic S. K. Makovsky. He justly pulled my poems to pieces, but at the end of the letter he turned from the weak verse to the man behind it; he suggested that I should take up another profession, e.g. go into trade. The *Apollo* was for me the highest arbiter. For a month I didn't write anything: if Makovsky advised me to become a shopkeeper, it must mean that I was an impostor.

Liza managed to reassure and encourage me and I went back to writing.

I had not abandoned the thought of going to Russia and giving myself wholly to illegal work. Once I started discussing it with one of Lenin's closest collaborators; he replied that he understood my feelings, but it would be far better if I stayed in Paris and acquired more knowledge: the party needed literary men, too. (I don't know whether he had read any of my verse, but no doubt he had heard that I had an itch to write poetry.)

Finally, one of my friends suggested that I should go to Vienna: later on I might be used for smuggling 'literature' into Russia. Some other time I shall tell the story of my brief stay in Vienna, which ended in my final and utter confusion. I returned to Paris devastated, realising that this was the start of a new chapter in my life.

I was sitting on a boulevard bench with Liza, telling her about my trip to Vienna and saying how intolerable life is when one hasn't got a clear goal. Liza talked about something different. It was a very melancholy meeting. Liza made me a present of a book: on the flyleaf she wrote that you must bind your heart with iron hoops like a barrel. I thought: where do I find the hoops? At home I opened the book: it was Bryusov's poems. 'All dreams are sweet to me, all words are dear to me, to all the gods I dedicate my songs.' Everything within me resisted those words: I still remembered the meetings in the Tatar

<sup>1</sup> 'Northern Lights'.

<sup>2</sup> A magazine devoted to literature and art of 'Decadent' trend.

Cemetery, the nights in prison, the declarations and oaths of loyalty. One dream isn't like another. And what god can there be for man if there are many gods? Above all: how to live when you no longer believe in anything?

I wrote about my despair, about having had a life and having one no more, about red banners, about trumpeters without trumpets, about the strangeness and the cruelty of Paris, about love. It was bad lyric poetry. (In Russia today the term 'lyric poetry', like many others, has acquired a new meaning: the publishers, the critics, the poetry editors, in a word, not the poetry makers but the poetry 'takers' or experts, apply the term 'lyric poetry' only to love poems, as though: 'When the noise of the day is silenced' or: 'Be still, be secret and conceal, to be Your feelings and your thoughts' were not lyric poetry.)

In the summer of 1910 I went to Bruges. I was overwhelmed by this town. It was really dead. It had enormous churches, a town hall, towers, fine houses, but those who inhabited it were nuns and poverty-stricken dreamers. Today Bruges has changed: it lives off hordes of tourists and resembles an overcrowded museum. But when I first went there nothing disturbed the drowsy swans, the reflections of poplars in the canals, or the nuns. (Today even the nuns have perked up—they tout for tourists, they sell their handmade lace.) For the first time I looked at paintings and saw beyond the subject of the picture: Memling's madonnas with their pale faces, bloodless lips, their air of purity and detachment struck me deeply. I sensed that the artist's world was a closed, profound one, full of human mysteries. I did not yet know medieval poetry nor the architecture of Chartres, but the distant past seemed enchanting; in Bruges I wrote fifty-odd poems about the beauty of the vanished world, about knights and ladies, about Mary Stuart, Isabella of Orange, Memling's madonnas and the nuns of the Bruges *béguinage*. The Russian youth of nineteen, longing avidly for the future, torn away from everything that had been his life, decided that poetry was a fancy-dress ball: 'Dressed in a proud señor's clothes I waited in the wings, but through a producer's error I took my cue five centuries too late.' It really did seem to me then that I was made for crusades rather than for the *Haute Ecole des Etudes Sociales*. The resulting verse was precious; today I find it embarrassing to re-read, but I wrote it in all sincerity.

One of my friends who took a fancy to my poems said: 'It's unlikely that they'll be printed in Russia; there, every editorial office has its own

poets. But why don't you publish a book in Paris?' I went to the Russian printer in the rue des Francs-Bourgeois. To my surprise, the owner showed no interest in the content of my book; although he was a member of the Jewish Bund, my poems addressed to Pope Innocent VI in no way shocked him; he counted the lines and said that two hundred copies would cost me a hundred-and-fifty francs. I hastily retorted: why two hundred? I'm a beginner, a hundred copies will do for me. The typographer explained that setting-up was the main item of expense, but agreed to knock off twenty-five francs.

My parents sent me fifty roubles a month—one hundred and thirty-three francs. Unfortunately the plan to publish a book of poems coincided with certain events in my life. I was obliged to give up meals altogether and cut down on the number of *croissants* consumed at the counter; when I went to see Katya I always brought a bunch of flowers, however small. Nevertheless, I put aside the money for the printer. My *Poems* came out at the end of 1910. A few months later my daughter was born.

I gave fifty copies to a Russian shop to sell on commission; the rest I gradually sent to various poets in Russia—stamps were dear. Altogether the expenses were considerable and the returns hardly worth mentioning: only sixteen copies were sold.

In the summer of 1911 I earned my first fee as an author: six roubles for two poems published in a Petersburg magazine. This was an undreamt-of success, and Katya and I had a wonderful meal.

I waited for what the poets in Russia would say about the book. My mother was dreadfully worried about me: I hadn't studied, hadn't taken up any serious profession and had suddenly started writing poetry. And it was odd poetry at that: why should her son write about the Virgin, the crusades, ancient cathedrals? But, of course, she longed for somebody to praise me. She read Bryusov's article in *Russkie Vedomosti*<sup>1</sup> before I did and sent me a telegram of congratulations. Reviewing books by young poets, Bryusov specially mentioned Marina Tsvetayeva's *Evening Album* and my collection of poems: 'I. Ehrenburg promises to develop into a good poet.' I was delighted and upset at the same time: the poems in the book no longer pleased me.

Soon I couldn't so much as think of the first book without a smile

<sup>1</sup> 'Russian Bulletin'.

of contempt. I tried to be cold and rational, in imitation of Bryusov. But I was the first to feel bored with poetry of this kind and I started dreaming of lyricism, turning to my own recent past. 'No one to tell me "pay attention", no one to tell me "eat your dinner", no one to call my Ilyusha and no one to caress me as Mother did when I was small.' 'How dull it is to be alone, the night is long, I have nothing to read: but I'm a man and I am seventeen.' The book was called *Dandelions*. It had scarcely had time to reach my Moscow friends before I realised that I had not been cured of striking stylistic attitudes—all I had done was to hire a schoolboy's uniform instead of a cardboard cuirass from the theatrical costumiers.

I came across a volume of Verlaine for the first time; his gift of song, his melancholy and senseless fate stirred me deeply. At the Café Vachette in the boulevard St Michel a waiter reverently pointed to a sagging settee: 'Monsieur Verlaine always used to sit there.' I wrote about 'poor Lélian' (that is what Verlaine was called in his old age): 'Silent over his absinthe he would sit through the dark night until the morning star came up, and tufts of tangled, dirty beard straggled in disorder.' Again, it was somebody else's poetry: I could not hear my own voice in it.

I read a book by the poet Francis Jammes: he wrote about country life, trees, the little donkeys of the Pyrenees, the warmth of the human body. His Catholicism was free of both asceticism and bigotry: for example, he wanted to enter paradise together with the donkeys. I translated his poems and began imitating him: pantheism seemed to me a possible way out. I had grown up in the city but had always, from my boyhood years, felt suffocated in the labyrinth of streets; I felt free only face to face with nature. For a brief time Jammes' philosophy captivated me—he justified both the dove and the eagle. (I am now speaking of birds, not social classes.) I had long been tormented by the thought: Where does evil come from? Dualism repelled me; I hated the bourgeoisie as much as ever, but I already knew that not all questions would be solved by the common ownership of the means of production. I clutched at the god of donkeys and trees. Francis Jammes allowed me to come and see him; he was living at Orthez, near the Spanish frontier. He had a comfortable beard and a kind voice; he received me in a fatherly way, asked me to read some poetry in Russian, offered me home-made liqueurs and advised me to meet an up-and-coming writer in Paris by the name of François Mauriac. I had ex-

pected teachings and exhortations, but Jamnes showed me hospitality and condescension. I liked him but realized that he was no St Francis of Assisi or Father Zosima, but only a poet and a nice man; I left him with an empty heart.

I dedicated a small book of poems called *Childhood Things*<sup>1</sup> to Jamnes; in it I recalled the day spent at Orthez: 'The winter sun gleams through the windows; your children play on the floor. An old dog, asleep by the hearth, breathes loudly. Pine cones crackle in the fireplace. I speak, I listen and wonder whence your calmness comes, I think that a cheerless road awaits me, a railway station and a smoke-filled train.' That is not how one remembers a great teacher but a dear old uncle down in the country.

Soon I got tired of playing at childishness. I began to imitate Guillaume Apollinaire. (Of course, whenever I was imitating anyone I did not see it: it always seemed to me that last year I really had imitated someone but this year the voice was my own.)

From time to time my poems were published in *Novy Zhurnal dlya Vsekh, Russkoye Bogatstvo, Zhizn dlya Vsekh, Russkaya Mysl*<sup>2</sup>. I received a short but friendly letter from Korolenko. All my papers have been lost. In a book of Korolenko's letters I found one to A. G. Hornfeld written in the spring of 1913 in which he speaks of two of my poems: 'In my opinion, the first lines are very good and very timely: "So once again my dreams of Russia are only something I've seen in sleep—So the paths I tread are alien ones again, and I am doomed to follow them".'

Rirakhovsky, a Jew with a luxuriant black beard, started a printing press in Paris. It was housed in a tiny shop in the boulevard Saint-Jacques. Rirakhovsky and two compositors stood at their cases. One was a Bolshevik, one a Menshevik. They printed posters for émigré meetings and argued who had the better right to call themselves Social Democrats after the party split. Rirakhovsky was a man with a sense of humour and no greed for money. Who would have given me anything on credit in those days? My shoes gaped, my trousers ended in a fringe; I was pale, thin and my eyes often glittered with hunger. Rirakhovsky had a kind heart. He printed my poems and waited

<sup>1</sup> *Detskoye*.

<sup>2</sup> 'New Journal for All', 'Russian Riches', 'Life for All', 'Russian Thought'.

patiently until I brought him twenty or thirty francs. He used to say that my poems were bad, much worse than those in *Chtets-Deklamator*<sup>1</sup>, but that even bad poems looked better on laid paper. I agreed with him and published another hundred-copy edition of a slim volume on laid paper almost every year. The one called 'Weekdays'<sup>2</sup> was on sale at Wolf's bookshop in Moscow and, if I remember rightly, sold about forty copies.

I am not in the least minded today to justify or embellish my past. But here's the absolute truth: I never dreamt of fame. Of course, I wanted my poems to be praised by the poets I myself admired; but what was more important was to read what I had just written to anybody who would listen. In Paris there was an émigré literary circle. It included no one who later became famous. I remember the poets M. Gerasimov (he later belonged to the 'Forge' group), Oskar Leshchinsky (he played an important part in the years of the Civil War and died a hero's death in Dagestan; in Paris he was an aesthete; he published a book called 'Silver Ash'<sup>3</sup> containing a poem which went: 'Everyone takes us for Portuguese, we talk in Russian; once in this café I saw five slender, slender fingers on a whore's hand.'). Among the prose writers there were A. I. Okulov, a gifted wastrel who used to drink heavily during those years (he too became known at the time of the Civil War, saw a lot of action, was a member of the Revolutionary Military Soviet in Siberia, wrote stories and perished at the end of the thirties), P. Shiryaev and S. Shimkevich. Sometimes Lunacharsky used to come to our meetings. Other occasional visitors were the sculptors Archipenko and Zadkine, the painters Sterenberg, Lebedev, Feder, Larionov, Goncharova. (David Petrovich Sterenberg was a political émigré. At one time I rented a room at Meudon, just outside Paris; Sterenberg lived next door. He was wretchedly poor but every day I would see him with his easel and box of paints, on his way to paint a landscape. This exceedingly modest and quiet man had a great responsibility vested in him at the most crucial period: Lunacharsky gave him the Department of Visual Arts to organize. Sterenberg never persecuted or harmed anyone. Mayakovsky wrote in a book he gave him: 'To dear comrade without inverted commas David Petrovich

<sup>1</sup> 'Reader and Reciter'.

<sup>2</sup> *Budni*.

<sup>3</sup> *Serebryany Pepel*.

Sterenberga affectionately Mayakovsky.' Sterenberg had one fault: he was a good painter and loved art; in the thirties he was counted among the 'formalists'. I remember an article by a critic who was shocked because Sterenberg had painted a still-life of a herring; the critic saw in this a desire to denigrate the present age. Sterenberg died in 1948, and in 1960 a small exhibition of his work was arranged; everyone saw what a pure, lyrical and subtle artist he had been. But in my memories he has remained the poor, shy young man in Meudon: dreams of revolution, hunger, art.)

I was already beginning to become a devotee of the arts: I not only talked about 'free verse' but also about the canvases of the 'Fauves' (the name given to such painters as Matisse, Marquet, Braque, Rouault) and the monumental sculpture of Maillol.

Several times I visited the house of K. D. Balmont. I shall speak of him later, as well as of other writers—Alexey Tolstoy, Maximilian Voloshin—who lived in Paris for a long time. At this stage I want only to mention the occasion when F. K. Sologub came to Paris. A literary soirée was announced. Sologub spent a long time explaining to the gathering, which consisted chiefly of students, that Dulcinea was a different person from Aldonza. He was more like a headmaster than a poet. A rather grim smile would occasionally flicker in his eyes. I realized that the man before me was the author of *Melky Bes*<sup>1</sup>. But where did he get his music, those simple words that pierced one's heart, those songs that made him brother to Verlaine? His way of reading poetry was unusual: it was as though he put the words away in different compartments of a large drawer: 'The enemy—officer's—horse—trod—straight on my heart—straight on my heart.' The last time I saw him was at the Moscow Press Club in 1920. Some of the speakers were saying that the era of individualism was over. Sologub nodded in obvious agreement. In his concluding words he merely added that a collective must be made up of units, not of zeros, for if you add a zero to another zero, you won't get a collective but zero. In Paris Sologub received me courteously, listened to my poems and talked about music, mystery and again about Dulcinea. Whereas I, at that time, wasn't writing about Dulcinea but about dustmen, and the filth and stench of Paris streets. After this meeting I wrote a poem. 'I am reading, it is dawn; in the clear light it is strange to see Sologub on

<sup>1</sup> 'The Minor Devil'.

the wall—alive now (in his portrait), middle-aged, with beard and pince-nez.’

With Oskar Leshchinsky I edited a literary and art magazine called *Helios*. It soon died. Later, a poet by the name of Valya Nemirov turned up from Rostov. He had some money. He adored peace and quiet, was very short-sighted and used to say that he particularly liked some village in Switzerland (I forget which) where you could light a cigarette in the street without ever shielding the flame with your hand. I did not contradict him. We published two issues of a poetry magazine, *Vechera*<sup>1</sup>, in which I was able to print poems glorifying the approaching storm.

By this time money from home was coming irregularly. My life was disordered and exceptionally squalid. Emilio Sereni told me that his late wife, a Russian by origin, used to say ‘Ehrenburg used to sleep under newspapers in his youth’. The small studio I rented in the rue Campagne-Première contained a mattress on legs—I had no other furniture. Nor was there a stove. A Swedish painter once knocked out the window-panes: he wanted to reach the sky. I covered myself with newspapers on top of a thin blanket and a threadbare overcoat. In the morning I installed myself in a café and stayed until night, reading and writing—the café was heated. When I passed a restaurant the smell of cooking made me feel sick. Sometimes I did not eat for three or four days on end. When a cheque arrived from Moscow I ate the money up quickly with various friends whose lives were equally meagre.

I remember a wonderful night shortly before the war. Registered letters from Russia were delivered towards evening; money was sent by cheque drawn on the Crédit Lyonnais. I had translated a story by Henri de Régnier for some magazine. They sent me ten roubles. The bank was already closed. We were unbearably hungry. We went to a little restaurant called *Le Rendezvous des Fiacres* opposite the Gare Montparnasse. It stayed open all night. I invited two friends. The menu was written in chalk on a blackboard, and we had time to try every dish, for we were obliged to stay till morning, when I was able to cash the cheque at the bank (the two friends had to stay at the restaurant as hostages). We had dined, dozed, breakfasted and lunched long ago: at six in the morning we started having breakfast all over

<sup>1</sup> ‘Evenings’.

again, since a new day was beginning. What a glorious night that was!

I did many translations, but what I translated was mainly poetry and this was very rarely published. I translated contemporary French poets as well as thirteenth-century *fabliaux*, the ballads of François Villon, the sonnets of Ronsard, the curses of d'Aubigné; I learnt to read Spanish, translated extracts from *Romancero*, the works of Juau Ruiz, the archpriest of Hita, Jorge Manrique, St John of the Cross, Quevedo. It was a passion, but not a profession.

I became a guide. Countess Panina organised trips abroad for village schoolteachers; the trips were cheap and gave teachers living at the back of beyond ('in bears' lairs', as the phrase used to go) an opportunity to see Italy or France. During the summer months I made a little money by showing the schoolteachers round Versailles. You have to have an exact knowledge of the names of a hundred sculptors and painters and the artists responsible for the large battle canvases, to recall mythology, to explain the allegorical meaning of various fountains. On the whole this wasn't difficult. It was far more difficult to keep track of a crowd of people who were abroad for the first time. Some of the women were always trying to escape to the fashion shops to get at least a glimpse of the clothes. Among the men there were some who dreamt of night-clubs and bought obscene post-cards. I used to count the tourists as they went down into the *Métro* and again as they came up; often two or three would be missing. A teacher from Kobelyaki asked me to lock him at night in his hotel room: he had met a Frenchwoman, if he saw her once more he would never return home—yet he had a wife, children, a job. I locked him in.

I also worked with individual tourists. This disgusted me. Nearly all of them wanted me to show them the night life. When I refused they called me a fool, a hypocrite, even a private detective, and held back my pay. I remember a businessman, the owner of a shop in Riga selling sanitary appliances. When he engaged me he kept asking suspiciously whether I knew all the styles; he took out a photograph of a lady with a tall coiffure and flipped it with his fingers: 'Not bad, is she?' It turned out that the lady was his fiancée, who owned a profitable house in Riga, adored art and laughed at her ignorant intended. I got five francs a day and my food. But the owner of the sanitary appliances shop nearly drove me crazy; in front of an ordinary house

built at the end of the last century he would ask: 'What style is this?' At first I used to answer honestly: 'None.' But he would get angry and say that in Vienna he had paid his guide less than me, yet he had known all the styles. I was afraid of losing my five francs and started inventing: 'Baroque . . . Empire . . . pure Gothic.' He noted everything down in a little book. At the restaurants I had to translate the menu for him and he would ponder for a long time over which dish he would prefer; he would order, and then choose for me whatever was cheapest: potatoes or macaroni.

For years and years I walked through the streets of Paris, ragged, hungry, from the southern end of the city to the northern. I walked and moved my lips: I was making up poems. It seemed to me that I had become a poet by chance, through meeting a young girl called Liza, who later became a poetess, a 'Serapion Sister', E. G. Polonskaya. That's how it looked in the early days. But it turned out that there was no chance about it: poetry became my life.

My book *Stikhi o Kanunakh*<sup>1</sup> was published in Moscow in 1916. The book is hopelessly mutilated by the censorship: there are dots instead of lines on almost every page. This was the first book in which I spoke with my own voice. I wrote of war: 'Over the pillow they've hung a picture, they've hung a smart soldier, they've hung him up there so that the little boy should feel merry, so that the little boy shouldn't cry when the water drips into the washbasin. The Cossack smiles dashingly, the Cossack has a fur cap on, the Cossack has pierced another soldier, an enemy soldier, with his lance and red paint falls on the floor . . .' I wrote of Pugachev's execution: 'Your lacerated hands will sprout, will sprout, and crops of flame will cover the earth . . .' I wrote of myself and of the year 1916, which I called the 'violent eve'.

Bryusov mentioned this book in *Russkie Vedomosti* 'It is obvious that for I. Ehrenburg poetry is not a hobby and, surely, not a trade but his life's work . . . That is why I. Ehrenburg has no smooth rhymes or subjects traditionally accepted as "poetic", no ringing the changes on generally recognised poetic models and none of that false beauty and cheap skill which are so easily acquired in our day of widespread technical skill in versification (more precisely, all those things did occur in I. Ehrenburg's first books, but gradually he has learnt to

<sup>1</sup> 'Poems About the Evens'

overcome the temptations of superficial success) . . . The fundamental fault of I. Ehrenburg's entire work is his subordination to theories. He rarely gives himself to art with immediacy; more often he violates his inspiration in the name of what he understands poetry to be. Deliberately avoiding the pretty cliché, I. Ehrenburg goes to the other extreme, and his poems are not melodious, they do not sing, whilst his predilection for the most far-fetched assonances deprives his verse of the last adornment . . . I. Ehrenburg's attention is fixed above all on the purulent abscesses in the upper reaches of contemporary culture. To expose all the shameful, base things hidden under the glamour of modern European refinement: that is the task which (consciously or unconsciously) the young poet sets himself. And, with the determination of a surgeon laying open a malignant ulcer, he exposes in his unmelodious verse both the secret impulses of his own soul, which not everyone would avow, and all those base and shameful things which are concealed under the trumpery of our well-bred culture.'

I have been given a copy of the draft of a letter that Bryusov wrote to me at the same time. Telling me that he had sent the review to the paper, Bryusov added: 'I am sincerely fond of you, that is to say as a poet, for as a man I don't know you. That does not mean, however, that I am fond of your poetry. On the contrary. I say this frankly for the same reason that I am fond of the poet in you . . . My conclusion is the one applicable to all the "elect", i.e. to people predestined for poetry: "You must work!" Without work there are no Pushkins, no Goethes, not even Verlaines (for during the first half of his life the future *pauvre Lélian* worked hard, very hard), and I don't suppose you would want to rank below Verlaine—besides, it wouldn't be worth the trouble. After all, you won't be tempted by the laurels of some *prince des poètes* like Paul Faure! And here's a personal request: don't neglect the music of verse. Don't look to the Futurists. The whole essence of poetry lies in the combination of sounds . . .' The letter ended with the affectionate words: 'And so I embrace you across thousands of miles . . .'

I replied to Bryusov (that was in the summer of 1916): 'Your kind letter moved me very much. Thank you! On the whole I haven't been spoilt by response to my poems. And your words were particularly precious to me. I have read your article and your letter with great attention, There are many things I should like to say in reply; but I'm

no good at writing letters . . . I don't subordinate my poems to any "theories"—on the contrary, I am too undisciplined. The faults and filth of my poems are my own. The things you think are repellent I feel to be my own, the genuine thing, hence neither beautiful nor ugly, but simply necessary. I write without rhyme and quantity, not because of any "understanding of poetry" but solely because rich rhymes and classic verses oppress my ear . . . I am not drawn to the poetry of moods and nuances; the general, the "monumental" attracts me more, I always want to open up a thing, to show . . . what matters most inside it. That is why in modern art I like Cubism best. You talk to me about "sweet sounds and prayers". But isn't it true that not all sweet sounds are prayers, or rather, all prayers are addressed to gods, but not all to God . . . This is very narrow, perhaps, though not because I have a narrow "understanding" of poetry but because I am a narrow sort of man. Those are the most important things I wanted to say to you. Between us there is a wall—not only thousands of miles! . . . In calling my book *Eves*, apart from the general meaning, I had in mind my own private one. These are only my eves . . .'

Bryusov was right in saying that I wanted to expose the abscesses of society. Five years later I wrote the satirical novel *Julio Jurenito*. But I could not, and still cannot, abandon poetry for good. True, there have been long intervals during which I wrote no poetry (from 1924 to 1937), but I always repeated the verses of my favourite poets like charms: I haven't lived a day without poetry. In the *Book for Adults* I said: 'Sometimes, when all is said and done, I envy the poets. We barely manage to lift our feet out of the quagmire. Their manner of walking is like jumping seen in slow motion: they float through the air. I have noticed that when they recite poetry they throw out their arms convulsively: those are the gestures of a swimmer. Their pavements are not lower than the second floor. For us, commas are meat, passion, depth; but they manage without even full stops. The rhythm of poetry passes into the rhythm of time, and it is far easier for poets to understand the language of the future.' Those thoughts belong to the beginning of 1936. The Spanish War broke out soon afterwards. I wrote articles, pamphlets, notes, even a novel, but suddenly, as in the old days, I would begin to move my lips and make up poems: not because I wanted to see the future but because it was necessary to speak about the present.

Many of my past thoughts now seem to me wrong, foolish, ridicu-

lous. But the reason why I began to write poetry seems right to me to this day. An eighteen-year-old youth had understood that in poetry you can say what cannot be said in prose. The old man of letters writing a book of memoirs shares this thought.

# 13

A CRITIC has written that in my novel *The Fall of Paris* there are many characters but no hero. I think that the hero of the novel is Paris. I wrote this book at fifty, when I was no longer an iconoclast nor a preacher; the narrowness I had written about to Bryusov had eased with the years—the opinions of a man of fifty are like well-worn shoes.

But in the years during which I was formed it was difficult for me to discuss Paris. I loved it passionately and hated it no less: 'Paris, I wait for you at night, you come like a pimp . . .' I stopped going to lectures: Paris was my school, a good school but a harsh one. I often cursed it, not because my life was hard but because Paris forced me to understand the hardship of life.

One might have thought that after the calm of pre-revolutionary Moscow, her wooden houses, cabs, samovars, her leaden-weight merchant sleep, Paris would astonish me by its modernity, boldness, innovations. Yes, of course, there were many cars, they progressed with difficulty down the narrow medieval streets. The newspapers often called Paris *la ville lumière*. And indeed, the *grands boulevards* were lit much more brightly than Tverskaya or Kuznetsky Most; but to find electric light inside a house was rare—I daresay even rarer than in Moscow. The hovels of the *zone*—the area near the old city fortifications—seemed to me unbelievable. Often, at night, I used to go to the rue Mouffetard where great fat rats scuttled about. The Eiffel Tower still provoked arguments: people of Maupassant's generation, who thought as he did that it had ruined the appearance of Paris, were still living. The young painters liked it. The tower itself had attained the age of a marriageable girl; no one could have foreseen that it would serve a useful purpose for radio and television. There were few telephones, but the pneumatic post flourished. Never before had I seen so many old houses, ash-coloured, wrinkled, stained. I did not know then that when a Paris house has stood for thirty or forty years it acquires the look of an ancient monument; all the houses seemed ancient to me, and the past opened before me like a new, unknown world.

I entered a dark street as one enters a jungle. In Moscow, looking at the cathedrals of the Kremlin, I had never bothered to think whether or not they were beautiful: they were outside my life, they had nothing whatever to do with political meetings or the wings of Gorky's stormy petrel. At school I had reluctantly learned by heart the names of the independent princes of medieval Russia, thinking that this was an abstraction like a theorem or a Latin lesson: 'many are the nouns in *is, masculini generis*'. But in Paris the past seemed one with the present; even the street names were mystifying—rue de la Reine Blanche, rue du Chat-Qui-Pêche; Katya lived in the rue de l'Épée-de-Bois. I often used to enter the house where Marat had hidden. A herd of goats would pick its way through the throng of motor cars, and the goatherd would milk an obstreperous nanny goat where she stood.

I wandered along the quays of the Seine and rummaged in boxes full of old books. The booksellers themselves seemed still more ancient than the little volumes in leather or parchment bindings. There I would sometimes see an old man looking like a bookseller himself; he used to take a book in his hands as a gardener holds a pear, with passion yet with competence. He was Anatole France. (I never saw him afterwards; I went to his funeral in 1924, when senators and workmen, academicians and adolescents followed the old epicure's coffin. In 1946 Anatole France's grandson took me round the author's house at La Bachelière near Tours; I realised then that the epicure had been, not a bookworm, not an aesthete, but a live human being: the house was crowded, not with collections, but with those fragments which years of life, travels, passions and encounters leave behind them. Among the books on the shelf there were surely those which Anatole France had bought on the quay when I saw him.)

Once, in the midst of old psalters and pastoral poems, I happened upon Baratynsky's *Edda*. The flyleaf bore the inscription: 'To Prosper Mérimée, translator of our great Pushkin, Baratynsky.' I paid six *sous* for the book and started reading it at once. The fish-scale surface of the Seine rippled drearily; a well-fed tom-cat slept on the deck of a barge. Opposite there was a morgue where Paris night-birds used to go towards morning to gape at the corpses of suicides. Notre-Dame looked like a stone woodland in the lilac-grey mist. Baratynsky wrote: 'The newcomer is full of unclear thought: are these not the grim ruins of an ancient world that lie before him?' Ruins, one might add, are sometimes extraordinarily long-lived: the Acropolis of Athens

has survived—not only spiritually but materially—the dwellings of people who busily devastated it over a period of twenty-five centuries.

In Paris the past merges with the present. It is an amazing city: it was not built according to a plan but grew like a forest. The wall of a condemned house inhabited by paupers, defaced by obscene scribbles, declarations of love, aggressive pre-election slogans, has every claim to the veneration of passers-by and to the State's protection.

I found it hard to distinguish today from yesterday: Paris has its own calendar. Speaking of social revolution, Jaurès referred to ancient myths, ranting and gesticulating like Mounet-Sully in the role of Oedipus. In the churches I often saw students who sprinkled their foreheads with holy water and, at the sound of a bell, fell to their knees as one man. The poet Charles Péguy wrote about Joan of Arc and was regarded as a Catholic. I liked his poetry: he repeated the same thing a hundred times over and each time he varied what he had said before; his rhythm was like the course of a sporting dog that goes the same way as its master yet scouts in circles all the time. Once I had occasion to talk with him in the editorial offices of the *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*. I thought he would talk about religion, Bergson and Messianism, but he turned the conversation to Russia: 'I know a little of your writers. It may be that the Russians will be the first to overthrow the power of money . . .'

I read the poetry of François Villon; he lived in the fifteenth century, was a thief and a bandit: '*Je meurs de soif auprès de la fontaine. . . . Je ris en pleurs et attends sans espoir . . .*' I had recently translated some poems by Mallarmé who was regarded as one of the initiators of the new poetry. I realized that François Villon was much closer to me than the author of *L'après-midi d'un faune*. I read and re-read *Le Rouge et le Noir*; it was difficult to imagine that this novel was already eighty years old. People round me were saying that André Gide was the writer who exposed the modern age; I got hold of his novel *La Porte Etroite*. It seemed to me that this book had been written in the eighteenth century, and could not help smiling at the thought that its author was alive—I had seen him at the *Vieux Colombier* theatre.

Everything seemed unexpected and everything was possible. I was walking in the Place Clichy, composing poetry, when the square suddenly filled with people. They were shouting, trying to break through the cordons of police and reach the Spanish Embassy: it was a demonstration against the execution of the anarchist, Ferrer. A shot rang out,

barricades went up at once; omnibuses and lamp-posts were toppled over. Spouts of burning gas blazed. I was not too sure who Ferrer was and why he had been executed; but I shouted together with the rest. This, it seemed, was revolution. A few hours later people in the Place Clichy were drinking coffee or beer in perfect calm.

Paris in those days was called the capital of the world, and it is true that representatives of a hundred different countries lived there. Turbaned Indians denounced the hypocrisy of English Liberals. Macedonians held noisy meetings. Chinese students celebrated the proclamation of the republic. Polish and Portuguese, Finnish and Arab, Jewish and Czech newspapers were published. The Parisians applauded Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, the Italian Futurist Marinetti, Ida Rubinstein who had put on a mystical play by d'Annunzio. At the same time the 'capital of the world' was singularly provincial. Paris was composed of *quartiers* with its main street of shops, little theatres and dance halls. Everybody knew one another, chatted in the streets, gossiped about the baker, Jacques' mistress and the fact that Jean was wearing horns again.

You could go about in any clothes, do whatever you pleased. Every spring there was a ball organized by the students of the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts*: naked students and models paraded the streets; the most modest among them wore trunks. Once a Spanish painter stripped to the buff by the Rotonde; a policeman enquired lazily: 'Aren't you cold, *mon vieux*—' Twice a year—at Mardi Gras and Mi-Carême—there were carnivals; floats with people in fancy dress drove along the streets; crowds walked about wearing absurd masks and threw confetti in the faces of passers-by; prize white bullocks were brought into the town, and restaurants hung out notices: 'Tomorrow our respected clients will be able to order steaks from the laureate's carcase.' On all the benches, under the chestnut trees and poplars, lovers embraced with the utmost concentration; no one interfered with them. Once A. I. Okulov, after a dozen glasses of cognac, climbed on to the roof of a carriage and started explaining to the populace that all the Ministers would soon be hanged from the lamp posts; some listened, but, of course, no one believed him. I lived not only without a passport but without even an identity card. When asked for my documents at the bank, I went to the *préfecture*; I was told to bring two French citizens as witnesses. I was in a hurry to get the money and persuaded the owner of the bakery where I used to buy bread and a painter whom I

half-knew and who sat in a café drinking rum all day to come with me. A clerk supplied me with a certificate in which it was solemnly declared that so-and-so had stated such-and-such; this was sufficient not only for the bank but also for the police who sometimes made raids in search of bandits. In the cabarets they sang little satirical songs: the President of the Republic has horns on his head, the Minister of Justice is light-fingered, the Minister of Education runs after the girls and writes them ill-spelt love-letters. Gustav Hervé in the paper *La Guerre Sociale* called for the extermination of the bourgeoisie; the singer Montégus celebrated the soldiers of the 17th regiment who had refused to fire on demonstrators. Bales of newspapers were brought to the little shops at 5 a.m.; the papers were folded and laid on the pavement; passers-by put their coins in a saucer. There were at least twenty newspapers of every political shade. Journalists slung mud at each other; then they met at one of the cafés in the rue du Croissant and sipped aperitifs together.

One went to the café in order to meet one's friends, talk politics, chatter, gossip. People of different professions had their own cafés: barristers, cattle-merchants, artists, jockeys, actors, jewellers, solicitors, senators, writers, furriers. Supporters of Guesde never dropped into the café frequented by the supporters of Jaurès. There were cafés where chessplayers gathered; historic games between Lasker and Capablanca were played there.

I used to go to a café called *La Closerie des Lilas*, which means Lilac Garden. There were no lilacs, but one could order a glass of coffee, ask for paper and write for five or six hours on end (paper was supplied free of charge). On Tuesdays French writers, particularly poets, used to come to the *Closerie des Lilas*; they argued about the harm or good of 'scientific poetry' invented by René Ghil, admired the imagination of Saint-Pol Roux and abused the editor of the *Mercure de France*. Once an election was held: Paul Faure, the handsome, jet-haired author of many thousands of half-gay, half-melancholy ballads was installed as the 'prince of poetry'.

You might have supposed that everyone in Paris was standing on their heads, but the Parisians had an age-old, firmly established way of life. When you rented a flat, the concierge asked whether the new tenant had a mirror-wardrobe: a bed, a table, a chair could not be confiscated, but if the rent wasn't paid they could confiscate a mirror-wardrobe. At funerals the men walked in front, followed by the

women. The cemeteries were like the model of a town: they had their own streets. The graves of the well-to-do were inscribed 'owned in perpetuity'; this was not irony: the graves of the poor were dug up when twenty years had elapsed. After a funeral everyone went to one of the cafés near the cemetery to drink white wine and eat cheese. In the evening people did not drink coffee but various 'infusions'—lime flower, camomile, mint, verbena. Lovers animatedly discussed which infusion was the most effective: he needed a diuretic, she a digestive. Old women sat on street benches in their slippers and knitted. At ten o'clock at night the houses were locked from the inside; when a lodger rang the bell the sleepy concierge pulled a cord and the door opened; one had to call out one's name to make sure that a stranger wasn't allowed in; going out, one had to wake up the concierge by shouting '*la corde, s'il vous plaît*'. Anglers sat by the Seine vainly hoping for the imaginary gudgeon to bite. Sometimes the papers would announce that a condemned man would be guillotined at dawn the next day; a gaping crowd would gather at the prison gates to stare at the executioner, the condemned man, and then at the severed head.

I read Léon Bloy's books. He called himself a Catholic but hated the sanctimonious rich bigots and the hypocrites in mitres; his books were like the proclamations which are undoubtedly printed in hell to bring about the overthrow of heaven. I also read Montaigne and Rimbaud, Dostoyevsky and Guillaume Apollinaire. I dreamed, now of revolution, now of doomsday. Nothing happened. (Later, people claimed that no one who hadn't lived in those pre-war years could know the sweetness of life. I never noticed sweetness. When I asked French people what was going to happen, they replied—some with satisfaction, others with a sigh—that France had lived through four revolutions and was immune.)

Art attracted me more and more. Poetry replaced not only steaks but also that 'common idea' for which the hero of *A Boring Story*—and Chekhov with him—had yearned. No, the yearning remained: what I sought in art was not quiescence but frenzied feeling. I made friends with painters, began going to exhibitions. Every month the poets and painters issued various artistic manifestos overthrowing everything and everyone, but everything and everyone remained as before.

When I was a child we used to play a game: you mustn't say yes or no, you mustn't mention white or black; whoever said the forbidden

words by mistake had to pay a forfeit. It sometimes seemed to me that Paris was playing this game. Now I think that perhaps it was unjust of me to bless and revile Paris by turns. Restlessness, high demands and hopes are natural characteristics of youth. Lermontov wrote 'But he, the rebel, seeks the storm to be, As though in tempests there were peace, when he was eighteen. Who knows: had I gone to Smolensk, should I not have experienced a similar unrest? Possibly two or three years later; possibly not in such an acute form. As for the game in which you mustn't say yes or no, this has to do with the nature of art. And in Paris art is ever-present.

Paris taught me many things, it expanded the walls of my world. Paris is often reputed to be gay; to my mind—such are its houses, such its poets, such the eyes of its girls—it wears a sorrowful smile. This ability to be gay in sadness, sad in gaiety, sometimes lends Paris wings and sometimes clips those wings. However, I shall have many occasions to refer to this when I come to the events of the succeeding decades: at the time I am describing I reached no such conclusions.

Paris taught me, enriched me, beggared me, put me on my feet and knocked me down. All that is in the order of things: when a man acquires something he also loses something: you go forward and you say goodbye for ever to those joys and sorrows which only yesterday made up your life.

# 14

I HAD bad luck with Balmont. When I started writing poetry his books seemed to me a revelation; I dreamt of one day meeting the man who had written 'I've come into the world to see the sun'. It was two years later when I met him; much of his poetry already struck me as ludicrous. I worshipped Blok, read Annensky, Sologub, Gumilev, Mandelstam. Balmont had arrived in time to see the sun, but I came too late for Balmont.

I met him in 1911; he was then forty-four. I knew he was living in Paris and naturally sent him my first book. Balmont was a man of the emotions. His life was rich in odd experiences, many of them dramatic. For instance, he was twice an émigré; if one applies the ordinary labels, he was a Red émigré the first time and a White the second. After the crushing of the 1905 revolution Balmont was shocked by the reprisals, the gallows, the whistling of the Cossacks' whips; he published, abroad, *Songs of the Avenger*, a book of very noble sentiment and very poor verse, in which he called Nicholas II a 'bloody hang-man'. Although the book was singularly feeble, it made the Tsar angry and Balmont had to adopt the status of an émigré. It wasn't until 1913 that the Grand Duke Constantine (a mediocre versifier who signed his poems K.R.) persuaded Nicholas to grant Balmont an amnesty.

Balmont lived in the rue de Passy (later, this became one of the centres of the White emigration). He often received guests: Paris Russians, new arrivals from Russia, French people. He invited me too. On that occasion I was the only guest. His wife, a tall good-looking woman, received me warmly—I lost my shyness at once and forgot that the man before me was a famous poet. I never visited anybody in those days: the only places I went to were cafés and the dirty, unheated studios of painters; here, however, was a Russian home, warm and bright; I was given tea; Balmont's small daughter Ninika romped in the room. It was all wonderful and normal. All except the host's appearance: Balmont was out of the ordinary.

Parisians are rarely startled, but I have often seen people turn and stare after Balmont when he walked down the boulevard Saint-Germain.

In Moscow in 1918 people walked about glumly with shopping-bags, some pulling little sledges; everyone was cold and hungry, but still the passers-by stared: in the middle of the road a red-haired eccentric strode, his head lifted to the grey sky.

As a young man Balmont tried to commit suicide by throwing himself out of a window. He injured a leg and all his life he remained slightly lame; he walked fast and looked like a hopping bird accustomed to fly rather than walk.

His face was now extremely pale, now copper-coloured; he had green eyes, a sparse red beard and red hair falling in curls down his back. Once among the tourists for whom I acted as a guide in Paris there was a priest; noticing that his appearance had made someone laugh he started shamefacedly tucking his hair under his hat, pinning it up with hairpins. Balmont, on the contrary, was proud of his curls. He was like a tropical bird that has migrated by accident to the wrong latitude.

He politely suggested that I should read some of my poems, saying 'good . . . good'—no doubt he wanted to be kind to a young author. Then he stood up and began reciting his own works. The poems made no impression on me—the period of his poetic decline was beginning—but I was astounded by his voice, inspired and arrogant: he read like a witch-doctor who knows that his words have power, if not over evil spirits, then at least over the poor nomads who listen. He spoke many languages fluently, all of them with an accent—not a Russian accent but a Balmont accent; particularly curious was the way he pronounced his 'n's'—in the French manner or the Polish, it was hard to say. There were many rhymes in his poems with long 'n' sounds—*svyashchenny*, *vdokhnovenny*, *prezrenny*—and he lingered on them with obvious pleasure.

Sometimes he would ask me to his house; there I met Moscow art patrons, French translators, enthusiastic female admirers.

A young poet called Mark Talov came to Paris from Odessa; he told us that he had been forced to leave his home town, that he had a fiancée there. He was very poor. He recited his own poems; I remember two lines: 'My solitude is great, I have neither name nor patronymic.' We used to smile when he told us again and again that his fiancée was awaiting his return. (He went back to Odessa twenty years later and his fiancée really had waited for him.) Talov was very keen to read his poems to Balmont; I took him along but he became so con-

fused that instead of sitting down in a chair he sat on a hot stove. Everyone burst out laughing, but Balmont began praising the poems he hadn't heard.

Sometimes Balmont would be silent, staring absently about him, then again he would grow animated and talk about Egypt, Mexico, Spain. All countries appeared fantastic in his stories; he had travelled, it seemed, in every country in the world but had seen only one—not shown on the map—which I shall call Balmontia.

Chekhov wrote about him: 'He talks well and expressively only when he has had a drop to drink.' I often met Balmont in cafés. After two or three glasses of brandy he really did become an excellent *raconteur*; he could make one see, now a straitlaced Oxford landlady, now a medicine-man in Java, now Bryusov infatuated with magic. Invariably Balmont would repeat an ancient Georgian charm which had something to do with the colour black. It was impossible to quieten him down. He would shout to his female companion: 'I want to go into the night! Elena, do not resist!' There was about him something majestic and pitiable, arrogant and childish.

He has been compared with Verlaine: alcohol, music, a childlike nature. But, unlike 'poor Lélian', Balmont was a highly educated man; he had read a vast number of books. He translated poetry of different epochs and countries: Shelley and Calderon, Rustaveli and Whitman, Leopardi and Slovacki, Blake and Heine, Edgar Allan Poe and Wilde. In Balmont's translation ancient Egyptian songs and the poems of Paul Faure sounded the same. Just as in his love-poems he was concerned with his own feelings rather than with the women to whom he dedicated the poems, so in translating other poets he was intoxicated by the sound of his own voice.

He loved the grandiose: mountain peaks, precipices, oceans. The painter Braque once said that one must know how to check one's inspiration with a ruler; to Balmont such words would have seemed petty—his was a wholesale life. He wrote verse with the speed of a stenographer. He dedicated the same book to a whole string of people, from 'brother of my dreams, poet and sage, Valery Bryusov' to 'Lusya Savitskaya whose soul is free and translucent as a forest brook'. Look at the love-poems in the book *Let Us Be Like The Sun*; one follows another and each is dedicated to someone by name: 'To Bela', 'For Miss Netty', 'To N. K. Mazing', 'To Countess E. V. Kreutz', 'To Princess M. S. Urusova', 'For N.', 'For R.', 'To a Spanish Woman

Seen in the Street', 'For Maria Finn', 'To O. N. Mitkevich', 'For Dagni Kristensen', 'To Lusya' . . .

I met him several times in Moscow in 1917-18. He remained true to himself. The revolution irritated him by its persistence: he did not want history to interfere with his life. He fell in love passionately many times and cooled off again—then he wrote poems about it. He thought it would be equally easy to bid farewell to an epoch: 'This summer I fell out of love with Russia . . .' Once I read to him some of my poems about Pugachev, about the day of reckoning. At first Balmont's face puckered with displeasure, then he wrote this in my notebook, in verse: 'I have heard barbaric speech, prayers that were shouts and songs like groans. But I do not try to warn you. You want a wreck? The power of the downward slope is sweet. Be a barbarian. When arson reigns, only the barbarian is young and bold. Only the old are in the wrong.' Underneath there is a date: 28th December 1917. Then he went to Paris and decided that only he was in the right. His political poems cursing the revolution are as lame as *Songs of the Avenger*. Again he became an émigré, this time not merely for a few years but for life; he lived in poverty; his bouts of alcoholism became more and more frequent.

In 1934 I met him in the boulevard Montparnasse. He was walking alone, greatly aged, and wearing a threadbare overcoat; the long curls hung down as before, only now they were not red but white. He recognized me and stopped to talk. 'I'd heard you were in Russia . . .' I replied that I had recently returned from Moscow. He asked animatedly: 'Tell me, do they remember me over there? Do they read me?' I felt sorry for him and lied: 'Of course they remember you.' He smiled and walked on with his head raised high, a poor deposed king.

The Great Soviet Encyclopedia gives the 'decadent poet' twenty lines, the same number as Benediktov, but the latter is conceded some merit and Balmont none. Young Soviet readers probably do not know that such a poet ever existed, yet at the beginning of the twentieth century every student was familiar with Balmont's fame if not with his poetry. A. Volynsky wrote in 1902: 'With a few reservations, Balmont enjoys universal recognition; despite the unpopularity of Decadent poetry in Russia, the public snatches up and repeats the tender, light sounds of his poetic lute.' For the Symbolists he was a teacher, a master: Blok and Andrey Bely made a cult of him in their school years. Striking the balance of Balmont's heights and depths, Bryusov wrote:

'Balmont has shown us how deeply lyric poetry can open up the secrets of the human soul.' Writers far removed from the Symbolists, such as Bunin, also appreciated Balmont. It is hard to imagine a man more alien to Balmont's sometimes magnificent, sometimes stilted poetry than Chekhov, yet Chekhov wrote to the 'decadent poet': 'Do you know, I love your talent and every book of yours gives me a great deal of pleasure and excitement. That may perhaps be because I am a conservative.' Gorky spoke enthusiastically of Balmont and advised editors of journals to publish his poems. I remember the admiration with which Lunacharsky used to read his poems aloud. Hundreds of criticisms of Balmont's works were written, new editions of his books came out every year; you could not get a ticket for his lectures. He had only to be seen in a theatre or even in the street for him to be mobbed by ecstatic female admirers. Can it be that all this was neurosis and self-deception? Can Gorky's or Bryusov's recognition of Balmont's talent be explained by the fact that the Russian reading public shared his 'desire to hide from reality' and his admiration of 'barbarism', as the encyclopedia article asserts?

I mentioned Benediktov not only because he was once famous and was soon universally forgotten. It would be fair to say that in his unsuccessful works Balmont is reminiscent of Benediktov in his shrillness, his lack of taste. For instance, Balmont was capable of writing: 'I want to be daring, I want to be bold, I want to tear your clothes off.' (M. A. Voloshin used to swear that a certain midwife had sent him a 'Reply to Balmont' which contained the lines: 'I want to be firm, I want to be proud, I want to keep the men off.')

Yes, Balmont's work includes many bad poems; he wrote a tremendous amount and published everything he wrote. However, out of his thirty books one could compile a good one—he was, after all, no Benediktov. Besides, what sort of people enjoyed Benediktov? The wives of provincial mayors, whose standards were hardly very high. Whereas Balmont made many changes in Russian poetry; one has only to re-read such poems as 'I love the elegance of slow Russian speech . . .' or 'There is in Russia's landscape a tired tenderness . . .' Fate has been exceptionally unkind to him: people admired him, then took it out of him because he had aroused their admiration. Setting himself up as a rebel, as the spokesman of the modern age, Balmont was not only an egocentric, he was an astonishing anachronism. He entered the world of literature with the twentieth century. Cars were

already filling the streets, the factory buildings were already rising, the great social battles had already begun, yet Balmont remained a fourteenth-century troubadour on whom a modern suit of clothes looked absurd.

When some Futurists came to a literary gathering and started attacking Balmont as obsolete, he threw back his head and read an old poem of his: 'Slowly, more slowly tear the garments off the ancient idols, too long you've prayed, do not forget the vanished light . . .' The greatest storm of all was approaching, but the belated troubadour merely addressed a naïve request to the first gust of wind—to be a zephyr. Despite all the books he had read he yet failed to understand that ancient idols are not only divested of their robes—they are quite cheerfully burnt. This represented, perhaps, a still greater anachronism than his locks and his pose as a Velasquez hidalgo.

There remained a long, ungentle sunset: neglect, loneliness, poverty, mental illness. He died in 1942.

# 15

IN MY youth I was lucky enough to go to Italy twice. I had little money; I slept in inns and dubious haunts; I ate spaghetti at cheap restaurants—a bowlful cost two *soldi* and gave deceptive satisfaction for a few hours; when I lacked the money for a train fare, I set off on foot. I remember the months I spent in Italy as the happiest of any. It was there that I understood that art is not a whim, not a decoration, not a red-letter date; that you can live with it in a room as with a person you love. Every young man falling in love for the first time imagines that he is discovering a hitherto unknown world. So it was with me and Italy; it is a tradition for foreign writers coming there—from Stendhal to Blok, from Goethe to our contemporary V. Nekrasov—to find new happiness, to feel close to art in a new way. (It is true that it was precisely in Italy that Hemingway learnt the measure of human grief, but that was in wartime, and war is war everywhere.)

Italy for me was both paradise and schoolroom. In 1909 I looked at the canvases of Van Gogh, Gauguin and Matisse with suspicion, almost with fear, as a calf looks at a railway train. Five years later I made friends with painters—Picasso, Léger, Modigliani, Rivera; their works helped me to unravel the tangled skein of hopes and doubts. I found the key to modern art in the past. You cannot understand Modigliani without the art of the Renaissance, just as you cannot understand Blok without Pushkin. (I understood Blok earlier in life than Modigliani. I had known Pushkin from childhood, but no one taught me the ABC of painting; they merely told me that Raphael was the greatest painter in the world and that the picture 'He Was Not Expected' was associated with the revolutionary struggle.)

When I first went to the Louvre I was a savage; I wanted to see the Gioconda's enigmatic smile at all costs, and when I saw it I began to try and discover what it meant; then I remembered the Venus de Milo—must see that, doesn't everybody say she's the ideal of beauty? Hadn't Heine and Gleb Uspensky wept before her in sheer admiration? The Louvre was a large museum in a large city; I stood a while, sighed a while and went away. The little museums of empty, sleepy Bruges

became my primary school. But it was in Italy that I conceived a real passion for art.

I am not now writing a book about art, nor even trying to reproduce in every detail my impressions of long ago: it is very difficult in the evening of one's life to remember or understand the morning—the light has changed, one's way of seeing has changed too; today I am indifferent to many things that moved me then, and many things I passed by in my youth have revealed themselves to me with the years. Unlike the exact sciences, art does not lend itself to unchallengeable judgments.

Enlightened connoisseurs in the eighteenth century regarded Gothic as a hideous barbarism. Pushkin spoke contemptuously of the poetry of François Villon. Stendhal, though recognizing that Giotto was a step leading to Raphael, nevertheless thought his works crude and ugly. Judgments have changed since then: we can understand things which the best minds of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries overlooked. But shouldn't we, perhaps, try to avoid repeating their mistake of contemptuously dismissing works of art which seem foreign to us? Let me recount one man's changes of opinion solely in order to recall how relative are our judgments.

In 1911 I fell in love with the *quattrocento* and above all Botticelli. Dear Lord above, how many hours have I stood in front of *Primavera* and the *Birth of Venus*! Raphael's frescoes I found boring; Giotto reminded me of the ikons. Botticelli's women were not coarse, fat and pink like those in the paintings of the Venetians; they were not incorporeal nor too spiritual like those of Memling and Van Eyck. Venus gazed timidly, a little sadly at the world. Muratov's *Images of Italy* appealed to me greatly. It was as though the author had looked into my heart: he wrote that the *Birth of Venus* was the greatest picture in the world. Today I try to discover what it was in Botticelli that so enchanted me. Probably it was the combination of *joie de vivre* and bitterness, the onset of the age of unbelief, the ability to impose harmony upon turmoil.

Two years later, arriving in Florence, the first thing I did was to keep my appointment with the Botticellis. I went away abashed: of course they were beautiful, but I admired them as a stranger; they no longer coincided with my mental state. I no longer wanted to romanticise disorder; the storm was making me seasick and I wanted to gaze upon a steady coast. I thought with respect of men filled with a faith,

whether they were Valya Neumark or Francis Jammes. I fell in love with Fra Beato: his art was an action, he not only painted the Madonna but prayed before his canvas. I was attracted by Giotto and the Sieneſe maſters. I wrote: 'The ſtraight gaze of the Sieneſe, the ſmell of wax in churches, cathedral façades of ſtriped marble . . .' Once more I tried to underſtand why Raphael was famous and wherein conſiſted Tintoretto's attraction, but that remained a closed book.

Soon afterwards I forgot all about Fra Beato. I ſaw the elongated bodies of El Greco, Michelangelo's giants, the tragic landscapes of Pouſſin. I came to know dozens of different galleries. Sometimes fate would take me to Italy. It was a time of the greateſt events: one could write hundreds of books about them and ſtill not tell the whole ſtory. In 1924 I ſaw Italy humiliated, iñsulted, outraged: while I was in Rome the faſciſts kidnapped Matteotti. People were burning faſciſt newspapers in the public ſquares; it ſeemed to me that theſe were the firſt peals of thunder—they were the laſt. . . . Jeremiah lamenting in the Siſtine Chapel was trying to vindicate his reputation as a prophet.

A quarter of a century later I found myſelf in Italy once again. Botticelli's *Primavera* ſtruck me as mannered and ſickly. I gazed with reſpect at Giotto's Padua freſcoes, but no longer felt my former trepidation. But it was in my old age that I firſt 'diſcovered' Raphael (I'm ſpeaking about the Vatican Stanze—the Siſtine Madonna ſtill leaves me cold). The clarity and harmony of the *School of Athens* and the *Diſputa* ſtunned me. It is hard to believe that they were painted by a young man. As a rule painters are formed ſlowly, like trees; a painter's life is long: Titian lived to be ninety-nine, Ingres eighty-seven, Michelangelo, Claude Lorrain, Chardin, Goya, Monet, Degas to over eighty. But Raphael died as poets die—at thirty-seven—and was, one feels, the wiſeſt of them all. Subjects neither attracted nor repelled him. For example, he had to represent an eccleſiaſtical diſpute on communion; being a profoundly worldly man, he could not be iñſpired by the ſubject. We have extremely little intereſt in ſixteenth-century theological diſcuſſions, but we ſtand enthralled—Raphael's compoſition aſtounds us. 'Only that which remains intereſting even after history has delivered its verdict is ſuitable for deſcription', Stendhal ſaid. What, then, is 'interreſting' to us in the *Diſputa*? Not, of course, the topic under diſcuſſion, nor even the participants. The compoſition, the deſign, the colours go on moving us four hundred years after history has delivered its verdict not only on the adepts of the various forms of

communion but even on the religions which engendered those rites.

In Venice I could not bring myself to leave the long hall of the Scuola San Rocco where the Tintoretos are. Again, it isn't a matter of subjects—they are the same as in the pictures of many other artists. But Tintoretto, who saw, felt and understood the world tragically, was able to express this; the toes of a foot, a falling fold of velvet, a cloud, a fragment of wall were enough for him to tell the world what Shakespeare was to begin writing about soon afterwards. In Tintoretto's pictures there are all the elements of contemporary art; in the Scuola San Rocco one realises particularly clearly how naïve are the apologists of abstract art who seek a freer—or, if you will, a more profound—solution of the problems of painting than those found by Tintoretto, Zurbaran or, much later, Cézanne. Tintoretto had to take into account the dogmas of the Catholic church, the bigotry and hypocrisy of the Venetian doges, a multitude of—one might think—unnecessary obstacles; but a great artist needs obstacles—they are the launching pad, the starting point for the conquest of the unconquerable.

I have given a paraphrase of the highly debatable opinions of a youth, a man of forty and those I hold today as an old man, not, of course, because they are of any interest in themselves—and anyway I am not an art historian. It seems to me that what is interesting is not the opinions themselves but the way they have changed within the span of a single lifetime. The poet Balmont pleaded simple-heartedly for less haste in tearing the garments off the idols of yesterday. True masters have no need of our sympathy, but ordinary commonsense dictates a certain caution: dethroned idols may become gods again. Discovery in the realm of science overthrows the theories of fore-runners: it is no longer possible to study astronomy according to Ptolemy or Pythagoras; yet the sculpture of the ancient Greeks appears perfect to us. Today I do not care for Botticelli; the fact that I loved him in my youth is immaterial—what matters is that our great-grandsons, if not our grandsons, will surely love him. I find it difficult to say a kind word for the painters of the Bolognese school. I have my own accounts to settle with them, although that is not, of course, their fault; it was Bolognese painting that laid down for three hundred years ahead the canons of that conventional, eclectic art which, out of misunderstanding or habit, many people still call realist. (Bryusov wrote in 1922: 'Realism—using the word not as a philosophical term but in the sense that it is used in the realm of the arts—places before the artist the task

of truthfully reproducing reality. But what artist, where, when, in what country, at what period has pursued any other aim? The whole difference lay solely in what was understood by "reality" . . . Did the painters of the Italian Renaissance or even their predecessors, the original "pre-Raphaelites"—those whose work is so readily contrasted with the genre painting of the Flemish and the Dutch—dream of representing something alien to reality? What were the Impressionists—whom critics used to accuse of painting mere blobs of colour in no way corresponding to reality—trying to achieve? Why, precisely to convey reality more truthfully, more exactly by means of those blobs of colour, to convey it as it is received by our outward senses, our sense of vision.) A painter has only to represent, instead of an antique myth or a scene from the Gospels, an event that stirs the imagination of his contemporaries while adhering, in his work, to the conventional canons of the Bolognese school and he is congratulated: he is a realist. But twenty or forty years will pass, the last imitators of the academic school will vanish from the face of the earth, and then our grandsons or great-grandsons will be able to rehabilitate the canvases of Caracci, Guido Reni and the other Bolognese painters. The art of the past not only opens our eyes, it is itself opened up by the warmth of our eyes. Posterity's love is the tireless restorer that cleans lacklustre canvases and gives them back their prime radiance.

It remains for me to add that when I was in Italy in the autumn of 1959, the thing that made the strongest impression on me were the Etruscan sarcophagi—frenzied men and women rising from stone coffins. I looked at them for a long time in the courtyard of a small museum at Tarquinia, not far from Rome. Today, as I write this book and try to revive my past and my friends, the majority of whom I have survived, I see before me men and women who lived twenty-five centuries before I was born. It seems to me that I know and understand them like my own contemporaries.

In my youth I loved Florence with a specially tender affection: its village spirit, the combination of Donatello's sculptures and the peasants in their broad-brimmed straw hats, the ceramics of Della Robbia and the hills around the city, gardens, market gardens, solitary cypresses, little shops on the Ponte Vecchio, open-air markets, the clouded river and the clear sky, and the shade of Dante who here met his Beatrice. Like all towns built within a single epoch and therefore harmonious, Florence is a place one can understand and love at first

sight. With the years I have come to love Rome. Here the epochs intermingle: antique ruins and newly built districts, curling Baroque statues and early Christian basilicas, the High Renaissance and pompous monuments of the late nineteenth century stand side by side; at first this confusion troubles the newcomer, but then you realise that in Rome there is a peaceful co-existence of the centuries. Rome is beautiful not only where the tourist hordes observe it: every street, every wall of every house, however unremarkable, gladdens the eye. The harmony of Rome is complex: it has the unity that only a great artist or a great people can achieve.

How mistaken were the travellers (some among them were great men, like Goethe) who saw Italy only as a museum—plus the immortal beauty of its landscape! Everything that enchanted me and still enchants me about Italy is closely linked with people. Nations change, of course, but wherever the possibility exists of encompassing the centuries, of rescuing the past from oblivion and incomprehension, it derives from the genius of the people, from certain characteristics peculiar to it.

I lived in France for many years; I learned to understand the French. There is no need to speak about my love for them—it is well known. That is just why I venture to repeat the words of Stendhal who said that the Italians were simpler, more direct than the French. Could this fail to win the heart of a youth who still remembered the intimate warmth of talk in places like Kozikhi, Ostozhenka or the Arbat? Of course there are many different kinds of Italians, as there are of every other people—I am not forgetting the class struggle nor the fascist era—nevertheless, I cannot help believing that kindness is inherent in the Italian character.

I have often asked myself why the Italian films of the last decade have had so much appeal for people of all tongues—films like *Bicycle Thieves*, *Miracle in Milan*, *Two Pennyworth of Hope*, *Rome at Eleven*, *Nights of Cabiria*. They represented, beyond doubt, an important event in the development of the cinema. But the average cinemagoer had little interest in Neo-Realism. It is more true to say that because of the valid, realistic way in which these films reflected the truth, the cinemagoer was confronted with veritable, living Italians; it was not artistic principles but national characteristics that conquered the public; the screen showed a harsh, sometimes a hopeless life, but the blame for the sufferings of the people shown lay not with villains but with cir-

cumstances, not with the moral turpitude of this or that character but with the monstrousness of a social system.

Pictures of the war are still alive in the memories of millions of my compatriots. The political map of the world has changed; reason tells us that some things should be forgotten, some learnt anew; but the heart has its own laws. In 1949 a German told me that he had very much liked my book *The Storm* and particularly the battle scenes round Rzhev. 'A very lively description,' he added, 'perhaps you were there yourself?' When I said yes, he exclaimed, delighted: 'So was I!' and stretched out his hand. I must confess that this handshake did not come easily to me. I have often met Italians who told me with pain that they had been in the Donbass during the War; I was able to have friendly conversations with them. People who had lived under the occupation spoke about the Italians without resentment afterwards; a woman on a collective farm remembered: 'There was one who wanted to steal a chicken but was ashamed; he waited for me to turn my back, in the end I went away of my own accord—I felt sorry for him . . .'

In this book I shall have many more occasions to speak about Italy and the Italians: about Modigliani, Italo Zvevo, Bontempelli, Carlo Levi, Guttuso, Moravia; about Milan under fascism; about the Garibaldi Brigade in Spain; about the struggle for peace—Nenni, Sereni, Donini, Lombardi, Negarville; about meetings with the Frascati peasants; talks with Catholics; La Pira, Danilo Dolci. Sometimes, ignoring chronological sequence, I run ahead: I want to think something through to its conclusion, tell a story to the end. This, after all, is not so much the story of my life as thoughts engendered by remembrance. Let me now return to the years that preceded the First World War.

I am not trying to see the past through rose-tinted spectacles. Life in Italy was by no means idyllic. At every step I saw want. The Italian bourgeoisie was smugger and stupider than the French. At a café on the Corso one saw the deputies; they talked, schemed, made deals; there was a smell of dirty parliamentary cooking. I met provincial aesthetes trying to imitate Parisian snobs; as always, the disciples went further than the teachers.

In Paris I was introduced to the poet Marinetti, a man of great self-confidence and equal ambition. He gave me his long poem 'My heart made of red sugar': 'If you translate it you will reveal to Russia the poet of tomorrow.' I translated a fragment and provided a short

preface to it: 'It is difficult to like Marinetti's poetry. His inner emptiness, exceptionally bad taste and weakness for declamation are repellent.' Later I attended a literary gathering. Marinetti was glorifying Futurism, the miracles of technology, the conquest of the world. When, afterwards, he joined the fascists, this was a logical step: he did not have to adjust himself, he had always dreamt of violence; after the red lollipop, blood.

In Florence I once met Giovanni Papini, then thirty years old; he had recently published an autobiography called *A Finished Man*, which had caused a great stir. We sat in a small *trattoria*; young writers argued about the Futurists, about the 'Crepuscolari' (as one of the literary groups was called), about Croce's philosophy. Papini struck me as bitter, caustic. All at once with a bewildered smile he said: 'But whatever anyone says, the chief thing is for man to be happy—in a way that brings happiness to others . . .'

Again: somewhere near Lucca I fell asleep under a tree, tired and hungry. I was woken up by children. A fat, black peasant woman, the children's mother, invited me into the house and put on the table a bowl of spaghetti and a straw-covered bottle of wine. I greedily tucked into the spaghetti while my hostess mended a child's dress and, occasionally glancing at me, sighed. 'Have you got a *mama*?' she suddenly asked. I said that my mother was far away—in Moscow. Then, without putting down her sewing, she began singing a sad little song. I went outside her house; it was a black southern night, and glow-worms swirled and darted like myriads of stars.

In Italy I came to believe in the possibility of art and the possibility of happiness. But an epoch was opening when art seemed doomed and happiness unthinkable.

# 16

I SAT at the *Closerie des Lilas* and translated verses by French poets—I wanted to compile an anthology. Voloshin had introduced me to Alexandre Mercero, an unremarkable poet but a sociable man; he brought me books and introduced me to his more celebrated colleagues.

In 1906, N. P. Ryabushinsky, a prominent Russian industrialist, decided to bring out a literary and artistic journal, *Zolotoye Runo*<sup>1</sup>; the text was to be published in Russian and French. A stylist capable of editing the translations was needed. Expense was no object to Ryabushinsky and he insisted on having a genuine French poet. To meet the requirements proved difficult: no poet was anxious to leave Paris for long.

A few poets had settled at Créteil on the outskirts of Paris, in a building which had once been an abbey. They wrote poetry, did their own cooking and printed their work themselves on a hand press. That was the origin of the *Abbaye* literary group; many of its members later became famous—Duhamel, Jules Romains, Vildrac. All these poets were united by a desire to escape from narrow individualism and to be inspired by thoughts and feelings common to all men. *L'Abbaye* also included poets of little promise, Mercero among them; he fell for the job on *Zolotoye Runo*; life at the poets' phalanstery was monotonous.

Mercero said afterwards that he had liked Moscow, but did not care to remember that what he had particularly liked was a Moscow lady, the wife of a government official. It was Voloshin who told me about this chapter in his biography. The poet and the Moscow government official's wife were happy, but the hour of parting drew near. Mercero was not a poet for nothing; he suggested a romantic scheme: 'Fly to Paris with me.' The Muscovite lady reminded the amorous dreamer that it was impossible to leave Russia without a passport stamped for foreign travel. The innamorata had a sister, a very plain girl to whom Mercero paid no attention, but at the moment of crisis she provided a hope of happiness: 'Marry her, she'll get a passport stamped for foreign

<sup>1</sup> 'The Golden Fleece'.

travel and will announce that she's going to Paris with you. I'll come to see you off; at the last moment I'll get on the train and my sister will get off. Of course the passport'll be in my bag.' Mercero approved the plan; there was a smart wedding. As agreed, the innamorata came to the station, but when the third bell rang she made no move and merely waved her handkerchief; the lawful wife sat on in the compartment. Mercero brought back to the 'abbey' a wife he did not want, who, on seeing the curious phalanstery, was horrified: who would have thought that French poets lived less well than Moscow shopwalkers! Quarrels, reproaches and scenes followed; the poets of the 'abbey' had no time left for poetry. They persuaded Voloshin to have a word with Madame Mercero, who never did learn to speak French. In the end the poet's wife saw for herself that to wait for a better life was useless and went back to Moscow. The most touching thing of all was a small detail: describing his mistress's place, Mercero used to exclaim: 'In their house they served red caviare! In Russia you get black caviare everywhere, but they ate red caviare, they were very rich people indeed . . .'<sup>1</sup>

The French in those years knew little about Russia. I saw a production of *The Brothers Karamazov* at a leading theatre. On the wall hung a portrait of the Tsar and as they passed it everyone turned towards it and crossed themselves. I remember introducing Alexey Tolstoy to a young poet who frequented the *Closerie des Lilas*; the poet addressed his new acquaintance with reverence and finally blurted out: 'Do you know, they've been saying here that you were dead—it must have been a *canard* . . .' Alexey Tolstoy burst out laughing with that special laughter peculiar to himself, shaking both the glasses on the table and the unfortunate poet, who could barely whisper: 'Forgive me, I didn't realise that you were the great Tolstoy's son, I know that his son is also a great writer . . .'<sup>2</sup> Alexey Tolstoy once wrote that when he came to England in 1916, some Englishman or other extended a cordial welcome to the author of *War and Peace*. A critic from the paper *Le Gaulois* came to see Voloshin and staggered him with the remark: 'You were present, of course, at Dostoyevsky's funeral when the Cossacks beat up the students. We're interested to learn some details . . .' Voloshin adored playing practical jokes and began describing the 'details'; the critic, delighted, filled a whole notebook; finally Voloshin said, 'That's all I can remember; I was only four at the time. . .'

<sup>1</sup> Red is, of course, much cheaper than black.

<sup>2</sup> Alexey Tolstoy was, of course, only a distant relative.

Twenty years later I bought a large map of Europe in Paris. The north of the Soviet Union, instead of regions and towns, bore the legend 'Samoyeds'<sup>1</sup>. The *Petit Larousse* of 1946 contained information on Nesselrode, Katkov, the traveller Chikhachyov, but made no reference to such insignificant persons as Griboyedov, Nekrasov, Chernyshevsky, Herzen, Sechenov, Pavlov. . . .

But it is unfair to refer only to the French. Since I am recalling events of a rather humorous kind, let me describe how I was honoured at the English P.E.N. Club. This was in 1930. I received an invitation to attend a P.E.N. Club dinner as a guest of honour; a long document about the desirability of dinner jackets and the permissibility of dark suits was attached. The famous author Galsworthy was in the chair. He welcomed me warmly, saying that English writers were pleased to see in their midst the outstanding Austrian film director who had made that excellent film, *The Love of Jeanne Ney*. The Austrian film director Pabst did in fact make a film based on my novel. A dinner is not a disputation, and I shook Galsworthy by the hand. My partner at dinner was an elderly English lady with a vast décolleté; she did her best to entertain me and talked at great length about the romantic charms of old Vienna. Feeling myself an impostor, I said I wasn't Austrian but Russian. She at once became melancholy and full of compassion, said she was very fond of Russia and shared my sorrow, and then asked: 'But what have the Bolsheviks done to your poor general?' (Life in the militant circles of the White emigration was turbulent; one leader hated another and it so happened that shortly before the dinner I am describing, General Kutepov had vanished under mysterious circumstances in Paris.) I calmly replied: 'Didn't you know? They've eaten him.' The lady dropped her knife and fork: 'How terrible! But you can expect anything of them.'

The French like telling the story about the Englishman who, seeing a red-haired woman in Calais, later wrote that Frenchwomen have red hair. I remember a conversation among the Russian tourists whom I showed round Versailles. One man, a teacher, couldn't get over the wealth of the French—he had seen a beggar near the Gare St Lazare drinking red wine. 'They'll never believe me when I tell them at home—a tramp, a beggar, and there he was swilling red wine as if it was the most natural thing in the world!' The teacher came from Samara

<sup>1</sup> This word was used, in Tsarist days, of primitive Siberian tribes.

province; I couldn't convince him that wine in France was cheaper than mineral water. Another tourist, a secondary-school inspector, reached the conclusion that the French were poverty-stricken; he could speak French and struck up an acquaintance in the park at Versailles with a master from the local *lycée*; the inspector kept saying: 'So much for their culture, so much for their wealth! A master at a *lycée* and doesn't even keep a servant, his wife cooks the dinner herself.' An émigré, formerly a theological student and later an S.R., showed me a long story he had written: it concerned the sufferings of a Russian idealist who fell in love with a wicked Frenchwoman; the author devoted a hundred pages or so to general observations on French immorality; his basis was the fact that the French kiss even in restaurants. In vain did I try to explain to him that such kisses are equivalent to an affectionate word or look, that they do not prevent the couple from getting on cheerfully with their lamb stew or roast pork and beans; he persisted: 'I shouldn't like my wife to see that—why, they do it for all the world to see! What a nation!'

It is difficult to understand the everyday life of another country even for a man who has observed it for some time, let alone a tourist. How much nonsense I have read in newspapers, be they Russian or French, for ever based on that spreading cranberry tree under which Dumas père had sat.

It would be wrong to laugh at Mercero: his mistake was profoundly human. The former theological student—the one who was so shocked by French immorality—doubtless kissed his wife when saying good-bye to her at the station, which, to a Japanese, would have seemed shameless and immoral. The whole trouble is that people regard their customs or, to use a current phrase, their 'way of life' as the only right one and condemn (if not aloud, at least in their own minds) whatever does not conform to it.

Ideas about the character of a nation are sometimes formed on the basis of fortuitous and superficial observation. What did even a well-read Frenchman know about the Russians before the First World War? He saw rich people throwing their money about, spending their time in expensive Montmartre night-clubs, losing in a single night at Monte Carlo their whole estates, equivalent in size to a French *département*. The word *boyard*—the nickname for a rich Russian—has entered the French language. Educated Frenchmen admired Dostoyevsky, from whom they gathered that the Russian likes to kill without warning,

despises financial obligations, believes in God and the devil, spits upon the things he believes in and upon himself at the same time, and confesses in public places while kissing the ground. The newspapers reported disorders in Russia, terrorist acts, heroism among the revolutionaries. The French called the Russian revolutionaries 'nihilists'; a dictionary published in 1946, that is to say thirty years after the October Revolution, gives the following definition for the word 'nihilism': 'Doctrine having followers in Russia, aimed at the radical destruction of the social structure, without setting itself the goal of replacing it by any other definite system.' From the point of view of the French such a doctrine could appeal only to mystics. To crown it all, the Frenchman learned that 'nihilists' existed even among the *boyards*; this finally convinced him of the existence of a special 'Slav soul', which then served him to explain all subsequent historical events.

As a boy I read Russian novels in which Germans were depicted; some were dreamers, like Turgenev's Lemm, others were energetic, narrow-minded toilers like Goncharov's Stolz. In pre-revolutionary Russia the Germans were considered to be a moderate and worthy race. Recently I chanced upon a book by V. Rozanov describing the Germany of 1912—on the eve of the First World War—thus: 'To shake these honest people, these conscientious workers, honestly by the hand is to grow several feet in stature at once . . . The fact of a war with the Germans would not frighten me. Obviously this is not a neurotically vindictive people which, once victorious, would want to finish off the enemy . . . The German *en masse* is either a simpleton in politics or he simply lacks the appetite to eat up everything around him. That is why a war with Germany would cause me no anxiety. But, simply, it would be extraordinarily pleasant to be on good or friendly terms with these respectable people . . . I would give them more than their share, simply for the sake of their nice character. I am sure it would later be returned a hundredfold. I know that this does not at the moment correspond to Russia's international position and I express this thought almost furtively, as an aside, for the benefit of the future. . . . Why, to give pleasure to forty million such decent people other nations might well make a little room—a few people might even suffer a trifle.' Since then we have lived through two wars. V. Rozanov's words are no more intelligent than Mercero's talk about red caviare, but they will cause amusement to no one.

And what of the Russian myth of the Frenchman who is 'quick as a

glance and empty as nonsense', of his frivolity and impetuosity, his vanity and immorality; the myth about Paris, which was called 'the new Babylon' and had the reputation of being not only the legislator of fashion but also the nursery of licentiousness? (It was not for nothing that my mother was afraid I should come to a bad end in Paris—this rested on a universally accepted legend.) How unlike such descriptions was the country that I came to: a country where family ties were far stronger than in Russia, where people cherished their traditional habits, sometimes their prejudices; where in middle-class homes the shutters were kept closed so that the wallpaper should not fade; where draughts were feared like the plague; where one went to bed at ten o'clock and rose at cockcrow; where French was rarely heard in night-clubs; where I could count on my fingers those Frenchmen I knew who had been abroad.

Today, a plane crosses Europe in a few hours; one can fly from Paris to India or America overnight; yet people's knowledge of each other is as poor as ever. It is not thoughts that divide them but words, not feelings but the forms in which those feelings are expressed: customs, the trivia of everyday life. Lack of understanding is the medium in which the germs of nationalism, racial prejudice, hatred are bred: 'Look, his life is different from yours, he is beneath you and doesn't want to admit it; he says his life is better, superior to yours; if you don't kill him he'll force you to live his way.' One can reach agreement on what the diplomats have long described as a *modus vivendi*—a momentary respite; but genuine peaceful co-existence seems to me unthinkable without mutual understanding. They say that our planet has been fully explored for a long time, that now it is the turn of Mars or Venus. Yes, the map-makers know all the mountains, islands, deserts; but ordinary people still know very little about the way their contemporaries live on long-discovered islands, in countries opened up more centuries ago than anyone can count, and even in those countries which regard themselves as the discoverers. I speak of this because I have travelled throughout Europe, have been to Asia and America and have realised, as a result, how difficult it is to understand other people's lives.

# 17

WHENEVER he came to Paris, Maximilian Alexandrovich Voloshin stayed at a studio lent to him by the painter Kruglikova, in the rue Boissonade in the centre of Montparnasse so beloved of artists. In the studio there was an image of the Egyptian princess Tii; beneath it stood a low sofa on which Max (as everyone called him after the second or third meeting) sat with his legs tucked under him, smoking some kind of Oriental resin in an incense-burner, making Turkish coffee on a spirit stove, reading books on Assyrian art, Cubism or the Freemasons and writing poems and articles on art exhibitions and first nights for Moscow papers. On the door of the studio he had written: 'When you knock, say loudly who is knocking'; but he was a sociable man and the only person to whom he did not open the door was a Rumanian philosopher who insisted that his works should be published in Petersburg without delay and that Voloshin should give him a hundred francs' advance.

Andrey Bely says in his memoirs that Voloshin struck him as a typical Parisian, by reason both of his excellent knowledge of French culture and of his appearance: his beard trimmed like a spade—'not our way'—his top hat, his manners. Having met Max in Paris I was quite unable to mistake him for a Parisian; he reminded me, rather, of a Russian coachman—his beard, too, was a coachman's rather than a Radical Socialist's (just before the war beards began to disappear in Paris, but respectable Radical Socialists went on wearing them out of respect for the noble traditions of the nineteenth century). True, Russian coachmen did not wear top hats—these were the traditional headgear of French cabbies—but on Max's long, thick hair the top hat looked like a circus prop.

In Paris, Max had the reputation of being not merely a Russian but an arch-Russian. He relished telling the French about the dissenters who burned themselves at the stake, the whims of Morozov and Ryabushinsky, the terrorists, the white nights of Petersburg, the painters of the 'Jack of Diamonds' group, the holy madmen of ancient Russia. In Moscow, according to Andrey Bely, Max dined out on stories about

the bomb which anarchists had thrown into the Restaurant Foyot, the eloquence of Jaurès, the blasphemies of Rémy de Gourmont, the outstanding mathematician Poincaré, about his luncheon with the youthful Richépin. Voloshin found listeners everywhere, and story-telling was a thing he did well and with pleasure.

Children have hundreds of games, complicated or extremely simple, and this surprises no one; but certain people, especially writers and artists, retain the love of play until their late years. Gorky used to tell how Chekhov, sitting on a bench, would catch a 'rabbit' (the reflection of a sunbeam) in his hat. Picasso adores to play the clown and takes part in bullfights as an independent torero. Isaak Babel used to hide from everybody, not because they might disturb his work but because he loved the game of hide-and-seek. The poet Nezval made horoscopes all his life long. Max invented incredible tales, mystified everybody, sent little-known poems by Pushkin to newspaper editors assuring them that they were by a chemist called Sivolapov, and gave fruit salts to a girl who screamed that she wanted to commit suicide, telling her that it was an Indonesian poison. He played even while he worked; there is an article of his called *Apollo and the Mouse* which cannot be called anything but a game. His erudition was extraordinary; he would spend whole days at the Bibliothèque Nationale, but his choice of books was unexpected: excavations in Crete and ancient Chinese poetry, Langevin's works on the ionisation of gases and the writings of Saint-Just. He was a fat man weighing sixteen stone; he might well have sat like Buddha dispensing profundities, instead of which he romped like a small child. As he walked he skipped a little; even this way of walking gave him away—he skipped in conversation, poetry and life.

He succeeded in fooling or, as they say, 'having on' the whole of literary Petersburg—a reasonably sceptical section of society. A gifted young poetess called Cherubina de Gabriac suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Her poems began to be printed in *Apollo*. No one saw her—she only wrote letters to Makovsky, the editor of the magazine, who fell in love with her by correspondence. Cherubina announced that she was Spanish by origin and had been brought up in a Catholic convent. Bryusov spoke well of Cherubina's poems. All the Acmeist poets longed to meet her. Sometimes she would phone Makovsky; her voice was melodious. No one suspected that Cherubina de Gabriac did not exist, that the girl on the phone was the little poetess Dmitriyeva, who

also copied out the poems and the letters—and that the person who wrote them was Max, enchanted by his own invention.

There was no end to his fantasies. Every time one met him he came out with a new story. He could not bear bananas because—this had been established by an Australian scholar—the apple that brought about Adam's fall was not an apple at all but a banana. At an antique shop in the rue de Seine he found one of the thirty pieces of silver paid to Judas. The eighteenth-century author Cazotte had predicted in 1778 that Condorcet would poison himself in prison to escape the guillotine and that Chamfort, fearing arrest, would sever his arteries. Max did not insist on being believed—he merely played a game which he found entertaining.

He met people of every conceivable kind and found something in common with them all. He would explain to Lunacharsky that Cubism was linked with the growth of industrial cities and was not only an artistic but also a social phenomenon; he welcomed the most extreme movements—the Futurists, the *Luchists*<sup>1</sup>, the Cubists, the Suprematists; he had friends among archaeologists and could talk for hours about a Minoan vase, an ancient Russian charm, a single line of Pushkin. I have never seen him drunk or in love or really angry (sometimes, very rarely, he would lose his temper and then his voice squeaked). He was always arranging someone or other's début into literary society, helping to arrange an exhibition, telling the French that they absolutely must read translations of new Russian poetry. Alexey Tolstoy told me how Max encouraged him in his youth. He immediately gave recognition to the poems of the youthful Marina Tsvetayeva and surrounded her with kindness. During the hard times of the Civil War he gave shelter to a girl called Maya who wrote poems in French and later became the wife of Romain Rolland.

He wore eccentric clothes (the top hat was a festive symbol rather than an article of clothing)—velvet trousers and, at Koktebel in the Crimea, a shirt which he persisted in calling a 'chiton' or Greek tunic. People made fun of him: Sasha Chyorny wrote about 'Wax Goloshin'; but Max never took offence. There was the skipping Max who swore that the Eiffel Tower had been built according to a design by an ancient Arab geometrician. There was also another Max, a less complex one, who lived at Koktebel with his mother (she was called Pra).

<sup>1</sup> 'Ray-ists'.

During the difficult years this second Max could cheerfully put away a whole potful of gruel. People he knew and only half-knew always found shelter in his house. He helped many people in his lifetime.

Max's eyes were friendly but somehow aloof. Many people considered him indifferent or cold: he looked at life with interest but from the outside. No doubt there were events and people that really moved him, but he never spoke of them; he counted everyone among his friends, but, it seems, he never had a friend.

He was a painter, too, doing watercolours of the mountains around Koktebel after the conventional fashion of the *Mir Isskustva*<sup>1</sup>. He could turn out five watercolours in one day. But the art he really liked was different from his own productions. His poems contain many things that were genuinely observed and therefore truly pictorial; he had the gift of seeing: 'When it rains, Paris opens like a grey rose'; or, also about Paris: 'Rusty patches of gilt that has run in the rain, grey sky and intertwining branches, inky black like threads of dark veins'; or about Koktebel: 'The scorched, rusty, brownish colour of herbs, stripes of iodine and dots of gall.'

At first my attitude to Voloshin was respectful, like a pupil's to an experienced master. Later I was less enthusiastic about his poetry; his articles on aesthetics began to strike me as circus tricks; I was looking for truth whilst he played childish games, and this angered me.

His games included anthroposophy. Andrey Bely went on for a long time believing in Steiner as an old Catholic woman believes in the Pope. Max, however, merely skipped. He went to Dornach near Basle where the anthroposophists were building something like a temple. The war broke out; Dornach was in neutral Switzerland, near the Alsace border. The builders of the 'temple' (I remember that in my conversations with Max I always said 'your conventicle'), who included Voloshin and Bely, used to hear gunfire at night. Soon afterwards Voloshin arrived in Paris with a book of poems written at Dornach; the book was called *Anno mundi ardentis*. These poems differed strikingly from those written by other poets at the time: Balmont brandished weapons; Bryusov dreamed of Tsargrad, the ancient Constantinople; Igor Severyanin shrilled 'I shall lead you to Berlin'. But Voloshin, forgetting his childish games, wrote: 'Not to know, not to remember, not to see, to harden like salt, to vanish into snow! Grant

<sup>1</sup> 'World of Art', (1889-1904), edited by Diaghilev and Benois.

me that I cease not to love my enemy nor start to hate my brother.' And: 'Today there is no enemy, no brother: All are in me, I am in all.'

I was then writing *Poems about the Eves*. I could not be a contemplative sage like Voloshin. I cursed, denounced, raged. Max liked my new poems; he decided to help me and took me along to see the Zetlins.

The Zetlins were one of the families who owned Vysotsky's Tea Company. As I have already said, many members of this tea dynasty were Socialist Revolutionaries or sympathisers (the best known among them was Gotz). Mikhail Osipovich Zetlin took no part in underground work but wrote revolutionary poems under the pen-name Amari which, translated, meant 'to Mary' (his wife's name). He was a frail, limping man wearied by incessant appeals for money. His wife was more of a businesswoman. Apart from Voloshin, the painters Diego Rivera, Larionov, Goncharova used to come to the Zetlins' house; another guest was Savinkov, a disillusioned terrorist, author of the novel *Kon Bledny* (The Pale Horse) which had aroused a storm in the press—I shall have more to say about him later. But here I want to talk about the Zetlins. Sometimes they invited me to their house which was full of old engravings and china display cabinets, whereas I was living for the moment when the world of lies would collapse. In a poem I described an evening at the Zetlins, prudently changing their surname, however, to Mikheyev, Mikhail Osipovich's name to Igor Sergeyevich and substituting matches for tea. 'In the evenings he likes to be melancholy. Here's another evening—as in Lermontov: "You too will soon find rest". How pleasant to be a gardener, nothing on one's mind, watering the flowers. In the mornings how pleasant it is to listen to the little birds singing, to hear the rustling of grass on the high banks of the pond. Igor Sergeyevich has two match factories and securities worth a million. Igor Sergeyevich has a wife and a daughter Nelly, she collects engravings, he's a poet. Sometimes he wonders: am I really alive or not? In the evening the Mikheyevs entertain: a theosophist, a cubist, a clown pure and simple, and the lady president of a society, I think it's the one in aid of blinded warriors. Igor Sergeyevich smiles decorously at everyone. "Rather strong, please." "Another glass?" "The Gauguin isn't bad but I've seen a little Cézanne . . ." "Forgive the indiscretion—how much is he asking for it?" "Ten, but he'll let it go for eight." "Ah, Cubism, monumentality!"

"Only thing is, don't you know, one's getting tired of it . . ." "As for me, I must say I like it when instead of eyes they have those little thingumajigs, you know . . ." "Are you familiar with the meaning of the zodiac? I'm in ecstasy over Steiner . . ." "I shall see the Lord's countenance—I'm off to Basle . . ." "If only you knew the difficulties our society's in! We'll organize a concert. It's a terrible thing—to be blinded for life . . ." "News? None. Only that Lovcha has fallen." "One gets sick of it. I've stopped reading the papers." "Quite, but have you heard this one?" The guests have many more things to say: about Van Gogh's ear, the search for God, the blinded soldiers, the use of dogs in rescue work, Mexican dances and assonances . . . Doubtless I was unfair to Mikhail Osipovich, but this was due to circumstance: he was a rich, hospitable, faintly bored patron, I a hungry poet.

Max persuaded Zetlin to give money to the ephemeral publishing house *Zerna*<sup>1</sup> which published his own poems, my *Poems about the Eves* and my translations of Villon.

Zetlin wrote a long poem about the Decembrists. He went on writing it for many years. During the winter of 1917–18 in Moscow, the Zetlins received many poets at their house, fed them and offered them drink; times were hard and everybody came, from Vyacheslav Ivanov to Mayakovsky. When I come to write about Mayakovsky I shall try to tell the story of the memorable evening—almost all his biographers mention it—when Mayakovsky read aloud his poem *Man*. Mikhail Osipovich liked everybody: Balmont with his improvisations and his acrostic sonnets; the vastly learned Vyacheslav Ivanov; Mayakovsky who told him that the end of Vysotsky's tea had come; the half-crazy Velemir Khlebnikov with his pale prehistoric face, now talking of some soldier who had frozen to death, now repeating that henceforward he, Velemir, was president of the globe, and, when literary talk had made him tired, retiring to a corner and sitting down on the carpet; Marina Tsvetayeva, who in those days was championing the Princess Sophia against Peter the Great. Mandelstam alone used to worry his host a little: arriving at the house, he would say 'I'm sorry, I left my wallet at home and there's a cab waiting outside.'

Zetlin himself wasn't convinced that the end of Vysotsky's tea had come, despite the fact that he sympathized with the S.R.s and admired

<sup>1</sup> 'Grains'.

Mayakovsky's verse. Zetlin's house in Povarskaya was occupied by the anarchists headed by a certain Lev Chyorny. The Zetlins hoped that the Bolsheviks would drive out the anarchists and return the house to its owners. The anarchists were, indeed, driven out but the Zetlins never got their house back and decided to go to Paris. They left in the summer of 1918 together with Alexey Tolstoy (who was a fairly frequent visitor to their house).

In Paris the Zetlins donated money to the journal *Sovremennye Zapiski*<sup>1</sup>, and for a while supported Bunin and other émigré writers. Then they went to America. Their archives were lost together with the Turgenev library.

Max was at Koktebel. He neither extolled nor cursed the revolution. He tried to understand. He no longer quoted Villiers de l'Isle-Adam or Cazotte's predictions but immersed himself in Russian history and his own thoughts. He never did understand the revolution, yet there was an uncharacteristic seriousness in the questions which he asked himself. In the summer of 1920, when I was at Koktebel, Max proved himself courageous: he hid a Bolshevik underground worker, for whom Wrangel's men were searching, in the attic of his house.

The Whites arrested the poet Mandelstam after some woman had declared that he had tortured her in Odessa. Voloshin went to Feodosia and obtained an interview with the chief of the White Intelligence, to whom he said: 'By the nature of your work it is unlikely that you are well informed about Russian poetry. I have come to tell you that Osip Mandelstam whom you have arrested is a great poet.' He helped first Mandelstam, then me, to escape from Wrangel's Crimea. He did not do this because he had been won over to the ideas of the revolution—not at all; but he was a man of courage, he loved poetry and he loved Russia. However hard the Zetlins and other writers tried to persuade him to go abroad, he remained at Koktebel. He died in 1931.

His poetry is little known today but his name is familiar to writers and those connected in one way or another with literary life: Max's *dacha* together with some newly added wings is now the Country House of the Literary Fund. It may well be that one poet or another has had a visitation from the muse at this *dacha*, so that even after his death Max will have helped some young author to make his début.

<sup>1</sup> 'Contemporary Notes'.

Sometimes I ask myself why this man, who spent half his life playing at childish, often absurd games, should in the testing years have proved more intelligent, more mature, yes, more human, than many other writers of his generation. Perhaps it was because he was not made for action but for contemplation. Such natures exist. So long as everything around him was calm, Max indulged in mysteries and buffooneries, not so much for the benefit of others as for himself. But when the curtain rose on the tragedy of the century—in the summer of 1914—he made no attempt to mount the stage nor to slip his comments into someone else's text. He stopped fooling and made an honest effort to comprehend what he had not previously met or known. When those of us who knew him remember him, we are sometimes amused, sometimes touched, but we never feel degraded: and that is a great deal.

# 18

IF I WERE to say that in 1911 I met a poet whose gentle, pensive face, fine wavy hair, absent-minded movements betrayed a dreamer's nature; that he had moments of boisterous gaiety alternating with profound sadness; that a book he wrote, published by the Decadent firm *Gryphon*, created a stir at the time in literary circles; that Bryusov, praising this 'all-but-beginner' to the skies, nevertheless expressed a doubt whether 'he will be able to remain at the high point he has achieved and find a way forward from it'—scarcely anyone would guess whom I was talking about. And if I were to quote some lines that have stuck in my memory, such as: 'Why so restless, grass? Is it the bowstring that's frightened you? Is the blood of the quails so hot that it's made your brocade ripple?', surely not more than a handful of poetry-lovers and scrupulous literary scholars would recognize that the man I mean is Alexey Tolstoy. Yet this is an Alexey Tolstoy I remember well.

In his autobiography written late in life Alexey Tolstoy said about his book of verse *Beyond the Blue Rivers*: 'I would not disown it to this day.' Not only were the 1911 poems written by the hand of the author of *Peter the First* but the young poet himself was already the same Alexey Tolstoy whom many remember as the heavier, balder man who had learnt to conceal some aspects of his character and deliberately to emphasise others. It is enough to glance at the published reminiscences of people who met Tolstoy in the thirties to understand what I mean; the events described and the stories or jokes attributed to Tolstoy are more colourful in some and less in others, but always the Tolstoy who ate with relish, talked with gusto and laughed infectiously obscures Tolstoy the artist.

Yuri Olesha, writing about his first meeting with Tolstoy in the autumn of 1918, says: 'Entertaining both himself and his friends, he acts a part all the time. What role is he acting? Can it be Pierre Bezukhov? Perhaps. Or is he showing us one of those eccentric land-owners he writes about?' No. Very often Alexey Tolstoy acted (with mastery, one must admit) the part of Alexey Tolstoy—an image created by an artist.

At the time I met him this 'all-but-beginner' was already well-known: his stories about the 'eccentrics' from beyond the Volga had attracted attention at once. He had all the features of the mature Alexey Tolstoy but they were not yet formed; the face which later seemed made for the draughtsman called, in his youth, for the painter's palette. That is not an invariable law of nature: some people soften towards the evening of their lives; an early harshness, narrowness, angularity are smoothed out with the years. Alexey Tolstoy, on the contrary, was much milder, or, if you like, more vague as a young man; and what matters most, he did not yet know how (or did not want) to protect his inner world from the people who crossed his path.

I don't remember who it was that first took me to him—was it Max Voloshin or the painter Dosekin? Tolstoy was in Paris in 1911 and again in the spring of 1913; during one of these visits he and his wife Sofya Isaakovna, a painter, stayed at a *pension* in the rue d'Assas. The *Closerie des Lilas*, where I sat and worked all day, was next door to the *pension*. I introduced Tolstoy to various notable habitués of the establishment: the 'prince of poets', the Italian Futurists, the Norwegian painter Dierichs. During the First World War Tolstoy, in Moscow, wrote a piece about Paris in which he remembers the *Closerie des Lilas*: 'But on the Left Bank, with the whole strength of French passion, with the magnificence and courage of poverty, poets, writers and journalists defended the freedom and independence of creative work, and in a little old café under the chestnuts, by the side of a monument to Maréchal Ney, they crowned with laurels the discoverers of new paths . . . In this café under the chestnuts, you can always meet at nightfall, by the windows, a tall grey-haired man who looks like a Viking and a grey-haired lady who once was beautiful. They are a Norwegian painter and his wife. They have lived twenty years in Paris and every day they have been under the chestnuts.'

He loved Paris and saw it somehow in a flash. 'Paris always curttained by a transparent bluish haze, grey, uniform, with houses that resemble one another, with attics, church domes and triumphal arches, intersected by green boulevards and held by them as though within a wreath . . .' 'All day, tirelessly, the vast city lives, rumbles, sways like a cornfield in the wind; at night it blazes with light; but what you feel after wandering about Paris all day is not fatigue but a calm, quiet sadness. You feel that here they have understood death and can love

the melancholy beauty of life . . . 'Paris is old, terribly old. I love it best of all on damp days. Innumerable silhouettes of rounded lead roofs with their attic windows looking out into the misty sky. And, above, there are chimneys, chimneys, chimneys, haze. The mist is transparent, the whole city sprawls like a forest, as though built of blue shadows . . .'

A few months before his death Tolstoy told me that when the war was over he would go to Paris for a year, stay somewhere on the Seine and write a novel; I remember his words: 'Paris predisposes one to art . . .' The eccentric who, according to Yuri Olesha, acted the absurd hero of *Beyond the Volga*, never felt like a tourist in Paris: he did not go sightseeing, did not swoon with admiration, did not pick holes in things but always settled down at once to live in the place. Sometimes he was very sad there, but happy in that sadness. (I am not speaking of the years when he was forced to live in Paris, during which he never ceased to think of the Russia he had left. I have already said that emigration has its own climate. In a letter to his mother written at the age of fourteen Tolstoy quoted an old folk-song: 'Heigho, it's hard for Afonyushka to live in his own country without his dear mother.' In Paris, as an émigré, he wrote a story called *The Moods of N. I. Burov*, for which he chose the epigraph: 'Heigho, it's hard for Afonyushka to live in a foreign country.' I can think of no better way of expressing the mood of a man forcibly torn from his native land.)

I well knew the Tolstoy whom Konchalovsky painted: a face merging into a still-life, a man merging into the life that surrounds him. But the Tolstoy I should like to talk about is a different one: a man devoted to art. Those words 'Paris predisposes to art' were not accidental. Like the real artist he was, he was never sure of himself, always dissatisfied, painfully seeking the right form to express what he wanted to say. He often spoke about this in his maturity, trying to pass on to young writers his own passionate attachment to his work; but he did not see fit to talk to many people about his unhappiness, his discontent, those anguished hours when you re-read what you have written the day before with surprise and disquiet. Many times he said to me: 'Don't you see, Ilya, I write and I think it's good, then I see that it's muck, do you understand, muck!' At the beginning of 1941 a new edition of his long story *The Emigrés* appeared (the title of the original version had been *Black Gold*). I thought the piece had not

come off and I never spoke to him about it. He wrote in the book: 'For Ilya Ehrenburg, a profoundly imperfect and approximate story. But, my friend, what matters are the end results of an artist's life. That is a thing you understand.' He often used the word 'approximate' as a condemnation. He used to say of a canvas he hadn't liked, of a line in a poem: 'It's approximate.'

At one time he wanted to study painting but soon dropped it. When we met he spoke about art with enthusiasm. His wife, who was an artist, was perhaps partly responsible for this. But Tolstoy had a gift for seeing nature, faces, objects. He counted many skilled craftsmen among his friends—cabinet-makers, foundrymen, bookbinders—men who not only knew their trade but were in love with it and applied their imagination to it. In his autobiography he tells of the impression Voloshin's translation of the poems of Henri de Régnier made on him in his youth: 'I was staggered by the way he coins his images.' Henri de Régnier wasn't the world's greatest poet but he knew how to write, and what impressed Tolstoy was, precisely, his craftsmanship.

Tolstoy also wrote that in his search for the vernacular character of Russian his masters were Remizov, Vyacheslav Ivanov and Voloshin. Even earlier—as a very young man indeed—he had become involved with Vyacheslav Ivanov's famous 'Tower'. Voloshin told me an amusing story from the period when Tolstoy was trying to assimilate the ideas and the vocabulary of the Symbolists. In Berlin he met Andrey Bely who was full of talk about anthroposophy. Bely was difficult to understand at the best of times, still more so when he was explaining his muddled religion. Soon afterwards at the 'Tower' the conversation touched upon Madame Blavatsky and Steiner. Tolstoy, anxious to show he was no ignoramus, suddenly blurted out: 'I was told in Berlin that now the Egyptians are being reincarnated.' Everyone broke into laughter and Tolstoy froze with embarrassment. Many years later I asked him whether Max hadn't invented the story of the Egyptians. Tolstoy laughed: 'I certainly dropped a brick that time, don't you know. ...'

Talk about reincarnation, mystical anarchism, the search for God, predestination—all these things were absolutely contrary to Tolstoy's nature. As soon as he had acquired some skill as a writer and found his own subjects, he parted from the Symbolists (though he remained friends with Voloshin): he made fun of the Decadents in his stories and later in his trilogy. But once, in December 1943, I was returning

with him from Kharkov to Moscow. Trains at that time travelled very slowly. Tolstoy and I occupied the same compartment; Simonov and various foreign journalists were in others. Tolstoy spent almost the whole time recalling the past—perhaps he was trying, during those two days, to do what I am doing now: to meditate on his past life. To my surprise, he spoke with affection and respect of the Symbolist poets, saying that he had learnt much from them; he remembered the 'Tower', too; he invited Simonov into our compartment and went on explaining to him for a long time that one must enter the house of art with reverence, as he once had climbed the 'Tower'.

Then he turned to Blok. In his novel *The Sisters* there is the Decadent poet Bessonov, in whom many have seen a caricature of Blok. Tolstoy explained that he had wanted to ridicule 'Blok's apes'. It can't be denied, however, that without realizing it himself he had endowed Bessonov with some of Blok's features—he confessed as much to me, and I believed him when he said he had not done it deliberately. The psychology of creative work, the unhappy misunderstandings which have arisen in the careers of many writers (it is enough to remember the quarrel between Chekhov and Levitan after *The Grasshopper*), show that stray features, actions, manners of speech of a living person may imperceptibly become part of that alloy which we call a 'character in a novel' without the author knowing precisely where memory stops and the work of creative imagination begins. Tolstoy found the idea that people had seen certain characteristics of Blok's in Bessonov hard to accept. He told me about his meeting with Blok during the war, and what a very human person Blok had been. Then he fell silent and towards evening he began repeating lines of Blok's poetry.

(Here is further evidence: Bunin's *Memoirs*. At the age of eighty-two Bunin was seized by a desire to denigrate everybody—Gorky and Alexey Tolstoy, Blok and Mayakovsky, Leonid Andreyev and Sologub, Balmont and Bryusov, Khlebnikov and Pasternak, Andrey Bely and Tsvetayeva, Yessenin and Babel, Voloshin and Kuzmin. Bunin remembers: 'Some Moscow writers arranged a meeting to read and analyse *The Twelve*. I went along too. I can't remember who it was that did the reading—it was someone sitting next to Ilya Ehrenburg and Tolstoy. And as the fame of this work, which for some reason was called a poem, had very rapidly become absolutely incontestable, as soon as the reader had finished there was a reverent silence followed by low-voiced exclamations of "Amazing! Remarkable!" ' Bunin goes

on to summarize his own comments—he violently abused *The Twelve*, calling the poem ‘a cheap, vulgar trick’. ‘That is when Tolstoy made a tremendous scene with me; the way he started screaming at me like an enraged cockerel when I had finished talking was really worth hearing.’ I remember that evening. Alexey Tolstoy doubted many things at that period, but Bunin’s words about Blok’s poetry he called ‘sacrilege’.)

Poems came to Tolstoy’s mind often and always unexpectedly—walking in the street, at a diplomatic reception or in the middle of a business discussion—causing acute surprise to whomever he was addressing. In the winter of 1917–18 we often went to see S. G. Kara-Murza, the loyal and selfless friend of many writers; there we used to have supper, read poetry, and talk about the future of the arts. We would go home at night, in a crowd. Kara-Murza lived out at Chistyye Prudy whereas we lived in Povarskaya, Prechistenka or the little side-streets round the Arbat. Tolstoy would amuse us by telling ridiculous stories; then suddenly he would stand stock-still amongst the snow-drifts, remembering a line of Yessenin, Krandievskaya or Vera Inber.

In the summer of 1940 I went back to Moscow from Paris. Tolstoy rang me up: ‘Ilya, come out to my *dacha*’—it was out at Barvikh. (For many years previously we had been on bad terms and would not speak to each other. Once he saw me at a tobacconist’s in Leningrad and whispered to my wife: ‘Tell him that tobacco’s no good. He ought to buy this kind here.’ However hard I try I can’t remember the cause of our quarrel. I asked Tolstoy’s wife: perhaps he had told her why we had been angry with each other. She said she didn’t think that Tolstoy himself remembered what had happened. Perhaps this provides the best illustration of the nature of our relationship.) At the *dacha* Tolstoy opened a bottle of burgundy: ‘Do you know what you’re drinking? This is Ro-ma-née!’ He asked me about France; naturally the tale was a tragic one. Then I read him some poems I had written in Paris after the entry of the Germans. A line caught his attention and he repeated it several times: ‘Art as obscure as man . . .’

He was a wonderful *raconteur*. To this day thousands of people remember certain stories which accompanied him through life: of the cook who, when he was a child, served soup in a chamber-pot; of the deacon who used to shoot billiard balls into his own mouth. Listening to him talk, one might have supposed that he wrote with ease, but in

fact he did it with painful effort, altering, re-writing, and often scrapping what he had begun: 'It won't come right, don't you see? It's muck.'

In his youth he was fond of complicated plots, of stories which developed in an unexpected way. He sometimes noted down, sometimes simply remembered, all manner of things people had told him, which later became the skeleton of a story. Let me reconstruct the genesis of the story *The Missionary*.

In Paris there were many Russians who were émigrés by accident, rather than by design, including a certain shoemaker who had taken part in the soldiers' rising of 1905; his name was Osipov. He had married a Frenchwoman and managed to scrape a living, but he was one of those Afonyushkas for whom life is hard in a foreign country. He became an alcoholic. One day he began to feel uneasy: why was his son a Catholic? He went to the Russian church in the rue Daru, confessed and begged the priest to give the child an Orthodox christening. The priest, touched, not only performed the rite but also gave Osipov twenty francs. Osipov didn't believe in God, Catholic or Orthodox, and spent the twenty francs on drink. A month later, feeling depressed and having no money for vodka, he decided to go along to the Catholic priest and tell him that the Orthodox church had deceived him, but he could 'switch his son back' to a Catholic. I told Tolstoy about the shoemaker; he laughed for a long time and made a note in his book. The phrase 'switch him back' has remained in the story, but Tolstoy has over-complicated the plot: the hero is no longer an alcoholic wretch but a clever crook who goes in for wholesale 'switching back' of children and blackmails the narrator.

Tolstoy often told me that his stories originated 'the devil knew how': in something he had heard ten years earlier, in somebody's comic remark. I remember our walks at night during the first winter after the revolution. Tolstoy insisted that I must see him home because my appearance scared off the bandits. (I can't remember how I was dressed at that time; the only thing I recollect is that Tolstoy was amused by a tall hat that looked like a monk's cowl. A few years ago someone brought me a photograph of Tolstoy and myself, inscribed in his handwriting: 'Tverskoy Boulevard, June 1918.' He is wearing a straw hat, I an immensely tall Mexican cowboy hat.) Tolstoy nicknamed me 'the rancid devil'. Soon afterwards he wrote the story *Rancid Devil* about a he-goat and a writer who is a mystic. The writer

does not resemble me—even his hat is low and round—and the rancid devil isn't a writer but a he-goat; still, the story was born at the moment when, looking at me, Tolstoy said: 'Ilya, do you know what you are? You're a rancid devil. Any bandit would run away at the sight of you.'

He did not work like an architect but more like a sculptor: at a very early stage in his career he stopped planning his novels or stories; when he began he often did not know how he would continue; he told me many times that he did not yet know his hero's fate, nor even what would happen on the next page: his characters came to life gradually, developed with the plot and dictated the story to the author. (This relates to Tolstoy's mature period.)

There are writers who are thinkers; Tolstoy was a writer who was a painter. A man will often long to do something which it is not in his nature to do. I remember Tolstoy in his youth sitting for hours over a book—he wanted to give it as a present and was trying to write an aphorism on the flyleaf; but nothing came to him.

He had a marvellous gift for conveying what he wanted to convey by images, through narrative, in pictures, but he was incapable of abstract thought; attempts to invest a novel or story with any general thesis ended in failure. He could not be divorced from the element of art as a fish cannot be forced to live out of water. His most perfect books—*Beyond the Volga*, *Nikita's Childhood* and, of course, *Peter the First*—have an inner freedom: the author is not bound by a plot, he narrates; he is particularly powerful where his tale has roots, whether in his own childhood or in Russian history, where he felt himself as confident and at home as in the room of a lived-in house.

Let me describe Tolstoy's first clash with racial prejudice, long before the Second World War. Across the road from the *Closerie des Lilas* there was an enormous dance hall called the *Bal Bullier* (the building has now been demolished). The Tolstoy's sometimes went there. Once a Negro asked Sofya Isaakovna to dance; she introduced him to her husband. Tolstoy took a liking to the Negro and invited him to lunch at the *pension*. Among the other lodgers there was an American; on seeing that the Tolstoy's had brought a 'nigger' into the dining-room he protested. Tolstoy naïvely began explaining to the American that this particular Negro was a highly educated man and even promoted him to the rank of prince. The American was not interested: 'At home, princes of that sort shine our shoes.' Then Tolstoy

lost his temper and threw the American down two flights of stairs. The landlady wept, but the other lodgers—all French—applauded.

In 1917–18 he was confused, troubled, sometimes crushed; he could not understand what was going on; he sat in the writers' café Baum; attended meetings of the house committee; found fault with everyone and pitied everyone, but was, above all, bewildered. Sometimes Bunin would come to see him, clever and malicious, telling stories cleverly and maliciously but in an unjust way; I remember him relating how a peasant had come to warn him that the other peasants had decided to burn down his house and take away his belongings. Bunin said: 'That's not very good,' whereupon the peasant replied: 'Of course, there's nothing good about it . . . I'll be going now, or else they'll grab everything without me. I don't want to be the odd man out, do I?' Tolstoy laughed mirthlessly.

The Petersburg poetess Liza Kuzmina-Karavayeva was often at his house; she would talk about justice, love of man and God. Her subsequent fate was unusual. She went to Paris and gave birth to a daughter; then she became a nun, adopting the name of Mother Mary. The daughter grew up and became a Communist. When Tolstoy came to Paris the girl asked him to help her to get to the Soviet Union. During the war Mother Mary became one of the heroines of the Resistance. The Germans sent her to Ravensbrück. When a batch of prisoners was being taken to the gas chamber, Mother Mary took a young Soviet girl's place in the column. During the winter I am writing about, Liza's profound disquiet infected Tolstoy.

He saw the cowardice of the philistines, the pettiness of their complaints; he laughed at others but did not know what he should do himself. Once he showed me a brass plate on his door: 'Ct. A. N. Tolstoy': 'Count to some, citizen to others,' he joked at his own expense.

'As she passed a dish to the Indian prince, Madame Koschke said, "Here's game".' That was a story he told at table, laughing. Then, after talking with a young Left S.R., he got depressed. Such was the genesis of the story '*Have Mercy!*' Later Tolstoy wrote that this was the first attempt to make fun of the Liberal intelligentsia. He did not add that he was able to make fun of his own distress as well.

In the spring of 1921 I went to Paris. Tolstoy invited various people to meet me: Bunin, Teffi, Zaitsev. Tolstoy and Teffi were glad to see me. Bunin, irreconcilable, interrupted my stories of Moscow with the

remark that he could now talk only with men of his own standing, and left. Teffi tried to joke. Zaitsev said nothing. Tolstoy was confused: 'Can't understand a thing, don't you know . . .' Soon afterwards the French police exiled me from Paris.

Later I met Tolstoy in Berlin: he already knew that he would soon be going back to Russia. In articles about him they speak of *Smena Vekh*<sup>1</sup>, of his 'gradual approach' to the revolution's ideas. I think the truth was both simpler and more complex. Two passions existed side by side within this man: love of his people and love of art. He sensed, rather than understood logically, that he would not be able to write outside Russia. And his love of Russia was so great that he broke not only with his friends but also with many things within himself: he believed in his people and believed that everything must take the course it did.

Twenty years later I often met him during a very difficult period, when intelligence was not enough—one needed love and faith. They used to say that Tolstoy's natural optimism always saved him from dejection: but no, both in 1913 and 1918 I saw him not only despondent but sometimes even in despair (this, of course, did not prevent him from joking, laughing and making up comic stories). But in the terrible summer of 1942 his spirits were high; he was firmly planted in his native soil and was released from what went most against his nature—doubts, the need to look for a solution, the sense of loneliness.

In December 1943 we both attended a trial of war criminals in Kharkov. I did not go to the square where the accused were to be hanged. Tolstoy said he must be present: he did not feel he had the right to evade it. After the execution he came back blacker than night; for a long time he was silent, then he began to talk. What did he say? Why, the things a writer does say: the things Turgenev, Victor Hugo, Sluchevsky had said before him.

During his last years he was drawn towards friends from the past. He often saw A. A. Ignatyev and his wife. I shall have things to tell about Ignatyev when I come to speak about the First World War. Tolstoy was fond of him: in a way, their lives had taken a similar course; both had come to the revolution from the other, the bygone

<sup>1</sup> 'Change of Landmarks': essays under this title published in 1921 and 1922 by a group of intellectuals in emigration who saw in NEP a return to capitalism.

Russia. Others who used to visit Tolstoy were Lidin, the painter Konchalovsky, Dr Galkin and the actor Mikhoels. Tolstoy was deep in work on Part III of *Peter the First*. In the autumn of 1944 he was already ill. I came to see him; he was depressed, tried to joke, then suddenly seemed to come to life—the conversation turned to his work. 'I've finished Chapter Five . . . My Peter is alive again . . .' He fought death courageously, and the thing that helped him was not so much his vitality as his passion as an artist.

On Red Army Day there was a reception in Spridonovka. Everyone was happy: the end was near. Suddenly the word spread through the halls: 'Tolstoy is dead.' We knew he was very gravely ill and yet the news seemed an absurdity—unjust, senseless, appalling.

Once he said to me: 'Ilya, you should be grateful to me till the day you die: I taught you to smoke a pipe.' It is true that I think of him with profound gratitude. He taught me nothing except, perhaps, just that—how to smoke a pipe. He was nine years older than I, but I never felt that he was my senior. He never taught me, but he gave me pleasure—by his art, his inner sensibility often concealed by a mask of gaiety, his appetite for life, his loyalty to his friends, his people, his work. He was a man formed before the revolution who found within himself the strength to cross into another century. He was with Russia in 1941. Looking at his great massive head I always felt: here's one who remembers everything, but memory has not crushed him. I am grateful to him because we met in the quiet, dull year of 1911 and because I was with him at his *dacha* on 10th January 1945 when, gravely ill, he celebrated his birthday, six weeks before his death; grateful to him because for thirty-five years I knew that he was living, cursing, roaring with laughter and writing—writing from morning till night, writing in such a way that, when you read what he had written, the sheer perfection of the writing made you catch your breath.

# 19

THERE is the well-known image of the ivory tower, chosen retreat of poets and artists who want to escape from reality. I have never been inside this tower and do not know whether it ever existed. Nor have I been to the 'Tower' (or rather, the garret) where the poet Vyacheslav Ivanov lived and which the young Alexey Tolstoy used to frequent. There were about a hundred of us, poets and painters, who hated existing society; Frenchmen, Russians, Spaniards, Italians, people of other nationalities, all exceedingly poor, badly dressed and hungry, but obstinate in their desire to create a new, genuine art. We lived in a stuffy ill-lit café which in no way resembled an ivory tower.

At the end of 1924 Mayakovsky wrote: 'Violet Paris, aniline Paris rises beyond the windows of the Rotonde.' Mayakovsky saw a Rotonde which tourists visited as one of the sights of Paris; it was no longer the shabby stinking café of old but an historical monument, repaired, enlarged, freshly painted. Foreigners came and listened to the information retailed by the guides: 'Guillaume Apollinaire and Picasso usually sat at that table. . . . In the corner over there Modigliani used to draw the other clients and give the drawings away for a glass of brandy.'

Today there isn't even anywhere to take the tourists: a cinema has been built on the site of the old Rotonde. Only in film studios is a makeshift Rotonde sometimes reconstructed when they make films about the turbulent and fascinating lives of the 'last of the Bohemians'. The films are trashy, not so much because the heroes bear no resemblance to their prototypes as because the film makers do not have the key to the thoughts and emotions that animated the frequenters of the Rotonde.

The café was like a hundred others. Cabbies and taxi drivers stood at the zinc counter, clerks drank coffee and aperitifs. At the back there was a dark room impregnated for all time with the stale smell of smoke, where stood ten or twelve tables. At night this room would fill with people and noise: we argued about painting, declaimed poetry, discussed likely sources for borrowing five francs, quarrelled and made

it up; someone would always get drunk and be thrown out. At two o'clock in the morning the Rotonde closed down for one hour; sometimes the *patron* would allow regular customers, provided they behaved themselves, to spend the hour inside the empty dark café. This was a breach of police regulations. At 3 a.m. the café opened and we were free to continue the joyless talk.

Libion, the owner, could never have imagined that his name would figure in the history of art. He was a fat good-natured publican who had bought a small café; by pure accident the Rotonde became the headquarters of polyglot eccentrics or, as Max Voloshin used to say, 'mumblers'—poets and artists—some of whom were later to become famous. Being an ordinary average bourgeois, Libion at first looked askance at his very odd clients; I daresay he took us for anarchists. Then he grew used to us and even came to like us. Someone told him that certain people had grown rich on paintings by buying the pictures of unknown artists for a song and selling them twenty years later for large sums. The idea of making money like this did not greatly tempt Libion; he once told me that he disliked gambling, and buying paintings was a lottery: at best, one artist in a thousand became successful. True, he sometimes gave ten francs for one of Modigliani's drawings—after all, the pile of saucers on his table got higher and higher and the poor wretch hadn't a *sou*. Sometimes Libion would give five francs to a poet or a painter, saying irritably: 'Go and find yourself a woman, you've got a mad look in your eyes.' A cigarette stub that had gone out long ago always clung to his lower lip. He mostly went about coatless but wore a waistcoat.

Once when I was sitting in the Rotonde the painter Myamlina asked me to hold her baby for a moment as she wanted to buy some cigarettes across the road. Half an hour passed, an hour, and still there was no sign of Myamlina. The baby started screaming. Libion came up to me and clearly disbelieved my story. 'I know your kind: you make children and then you won't have anything to do with them. All right, take him along to my house—there's an old woman there who'll help you. A fine dad you are, I must say.' Libion lived next door to the Rotonde. It was a completely bourgeois home with red curtains and a pretty landscape on the wall. He would never have dreamt of hanging a painting by Modigliani or Soutine—God forbid! He had grown fond of his clients, not of their works.

One day after the February Revolution some soldiers from the

brigade which the Tsarist government had sent to the Western front came to the Rotonde, having been told that they might find Russian émigrés there. The soldiers demanded to be sent home to Russia. After this the police began persecuting Libion on the grounds that his café was a revolutionary headquarters. The Rotonde was declared out of bounds to the military. Libion suffered serious financial loss; moreover, he was frightened: times were bad, Clemenceau had decided to tighten things up, the police were committing outrages. With much sighing and groaning Libion sold the Rotonde to another proprietor and bought a small café in a safe quarter as far away from the artists as possible. That was when he realized that ordinary customers no longer interested him. Sometimes he would come to the Rotonde, sit down in a corner, order a glass of beer and gaze about him despondently. A few years later he died. Painters and poets, some of whom had by then become famous, went to his funeral, and Libion, like many of his customers, achieved posthumous fame.

My first novel begins with an exact reference: 'I was sitting, as always, in a café in the boulevard Montparnasse in front of a cup of coffee emptied long before, waiting in vain for somebody to set me free by paying the patient waiter six *sous*.' Then I describe how Julio Jurenito, whom I took for the devil, comes into the café; this, of course, is an invention. At the Rotonde I met some people who were to play an important part in my life, but I took none of them for the devil; all of us in those days were both devils and lost souls being tossed in a frying pan by devils. We rarely went to the theatre, not only because we lacked the money but because we ourselves were compelled to act in a long, muddled play; I don't know whether to call it a farce, a tragedy or a circus. Perhaps the most suitable name is that invented by Mayakovsky: Mystery-Bouffi.

The outward impression made by the Rotonde was, of course, picturesque enough: a multitude of nationalities, hunger, arguments, rejection (recognition by our contemporaries came, as it always does, with some delay). It is precisely this picturesqueness that appeals to the film makers. Whenever a chance customer—taxi driver or bank clerk—happened to glance inside that dark back room he either smiled in astonishment or turned away shocked: it was an unusual crowd, even for Parisians who are inured to practically everything.

The most striking aspect was the motley of types and languages, something between an international exhibition and a rehearsal for a

future Peace Congress. I have forgotten many of the names but I remember some; a few have become universally known, others have sunk into oblivion. Here is a list, by no means complete. French poets: Guillaume Apollinaire, Max Jacob, Blaise Cendrars, Cocteau, Salmon; the painters Léger, Vlaminck, André Lhôte, Metzinger, Gleizes, Carnot, Ramey, Chantal, the critic Élie Faure; the Spaniards Picasso, Juan Gris, Maria Blanchard, the journalist Corpus Barga; the Italians Modigliani and Severini; the Mexicans Diego Rivera and Sarraga; the Russian painters Chagall, Soutine, Larionov, Goncharova, Sterenberg, Kremègne, Feder, Fotinsky, Marevna, Izdebsky, Dilevsky, the sculptors Archipenko, Zadkine, Meshchaninov, Indenbaum, Orlova; the Polish painters Kisling, Marcoussis, Gottlib, Zak, the sculptors Dunikowski and Lipschitz; the Japanese Foujita and Kawashima; the Norwegian painter Per Krohg; the Danish sculptors Jacobsen and Fischer; the Bulgarian Pascin. It is hard to remember them all. I don't suppose I've mentioned more than a tenth of the names.

The appearance of the customers must also have startled the uninitiated. For example, no one now can give an exact description of how Modigliani used to dress: when times were good he wore a coat of light velvet with a red silk scarf round his neck, but when he was in the throes of a long drinking bout, ill and penniless, he was enveloped in brightly coloured rags. The Japanese artist Foujita strolled about in a homespun smock. Diego Rivera brandished a carved Mexican stick. His friend, the painter Marevna (Vorobyeva-Stebelskaya), liked brightly-coloured clothes; her voice was loud and penetrating. The poet Max Jacob lived in Montmartre, at the other end of Paris; he would arrive in full daylight wearing evening dress complete with snowy waistcoat, a monocle permanently in his eye. A Red Indian in a feather head-dress showed his pastels to everyone. The Negress Aysha roared with laughter, throwing back her large head with its crop of wiry blue-black curls; her teeth glittered in the semi-darkness. The sculptor Zadkine came in overalls accompanied by an outsize Great Dane known for his uncertain temper. The model Margot would strip out of sheer habit; once she told me that her dream was to become a queen; when I expressed surprise she said: 'You silly boy, don't you know that everybody wants to rape a queen?' Kremègne and Soutine always sat in the darkest corner. Soutine had a startled hazy look, as though he had only just been woken up and hadn't had time to wash or shave; his eyes were those of a hunted animal, perhaps because of

starvation. No one took any notice of him. Who could imagine that one day museums all over the world would long to possess the works of this frail adolescent from obscure Smilovichi?

I remember the occasion when Sterenberg brought Lunacharsky to the Rotonde. I sat at their table. Lunacharsky praised the drawings of Steinlen and said that Franz Stuck was a Decadent but interesting artist. I disagreed; Steinlen was, in my opinion, insignificant, Stuck a bad and tasteless decadent. But I felt at ease in Lunacharsky's company. It was as though I were at home in Moscow. When he had gone Libion said to me: 'I never thought you had such respectable friends. That gentleman comes from your country, doesn't he? He could set you on your feet.'

When speaking of the picturesqueness of the Rotonde's customers I must admit that I did not lag behind the others. Even during the period of the *Closerie des Lilas* my appearance had been distinctly odd. Sofya Isaakovna Tolstoy recalls that Alexey Tolstoy once sent a postcard to the café addressed to me not by name but simply: '*Au monsieur mal coiffé.*' It was unhesitatingly handed to me. And in the Rotonde I became a complete tramp. In a newspaper article in 1916 Voloshin described a 'seedy, ill-shaven man with very long, very straight hair straggling weirdly down his neck, wearing a broad-brimmed felt hat that towered above his head like a medieval hood, his back hunched and his shoulders and feet turned inwards.' Max asserted that my 'appearance in other quarters of Paris caused anxiety and alarm among the passers-by. A similar effect must have been produced by the ancient cynic philosophers in the streets of Athens and by Christian hermits in the streets of Alexandria.'

The regulars of the Rotonde were unknown beyond the confines of the café. Picasso, however, already had a name and was mentioned in the press. Libion had been told that 'the Russian prince Chouquin (Shchukin)' bought Picasso's pictures, and he greeted him respectfully: '*Bonjour, Monsieur Picasso.*'

Pablo lived in Montmartre; later he moved to Montparnasse where he rented a studio near the Rotonde. I never saw him drunk. He looked like a youth and liked playing practical jokes. One day he came along with Rivera saying that they had performed a serenade under Apollinaire's window: '*Mère de Guillaume Apollinaire.*' This means simply 'Guillaume Apollinaire's mother', but in French it does not sound at all proper. Apollinaire sometimes dropped in at the Rotonde. I was

translating his poems and thought them wonderful but too melodious: for me he was already a classic. He also enjoyed playing jokes on people; once he offered to write a 'mystery play' about the serpent, the apple and Picasso (Pablo, being the superstitious Spaniard that he was, could not bear to hear the word 'serpent'). I used to say to Diego Rivera: 'Apollinaire is a Hugo, a Pushkin. He writes, ". . . *Le grand Pan l'amour Jésus-Christ-Sont bien morts et les chats miaulent-Dans la cour je pleure à Paris.*"' Diego would answer: 'That's because he's a Frenchman, or at any rate a Pole who writes in French.' I swore to myself many times that I should never write a single line of verse in French. As for Apollinaire's poems, I was of course unfair to them: he was a man of the new century, powdered very lightly with the silver dust of ancient European roads.

Life in the Rotonde was rather monotonous. Occasionally events occurred which would be talked of for a few days. Kieling and Gottlib fought a duel; Diego was one of the seconds. The journalists got wind of the duel and for one day the entire press was full of the Rotonde. The customers included many Scandinavians; it was for their sake that Libion took foreign newspapers. The Swedes drank more than anyone else: they were ideal clients. Once, I remember, a Swedish painter was sitting next to me. He kept ordering double brandies; a pillar of saucers adorned his table. The brandy did not prevent the Swede from reading *Svenska Dagbladet* with the utmost attention; the paper hid his face. Suddenly the paper dropped to the ground. We saw that the Swede was dead. The police came. We went home silently. Once a Spaniard, a great hulking fellow, got into a towering rage, snatched up a marble-topped table by the leg and started waving it about, shouting that he would kill us all: he had had enough of life. We retreated to the counter. Libion had one firm principle: never call the police. Suddenly the Spaniard smiled, put the table back in its place and said: 'Now let's have a drink to life number two.'

Nevertheless the Rotonde was a café, not a pothouse. Gallery owners arranged business meetings with artists. Irishmen discussed ways of getting rid of the English. Chess-players played immensely long games. Amongst these latter I remember Antonov-Ovseyenko; before each move he used to say: 'Oh no, you won't catch me, I'm up to snuff.'

At the end of 1914 Modigliani's brother—a Socialist member of

parliament—came from Italy. Giuseppe Modigliani was opposed to Italy entering the War. He arranged to meet Martov and Lapinski at the Rotonde. It is said that he was greatly upset to see his brother in a distracted state and put it down to bad companions and to the Rotonde in general.

And yet the Rotonde was incapable of depriving anyone of their peace of mind: all it did was to attract people who had lost it. The journalists had no idea what we talked about; sometimes they described the fights, the drinking and the suicides. The Rotonde's ill-fame grew. During the war I once saw a young, modest-looking woman at the next table. Her appearance made it plain that she was a chance visitor to Montparnasse. She began talking to me shyly; it turned out that she was a dressmaker who had come to Paris from Poitiers for the day and wanted to catch a glimpse of the artists' life. I explained that I wasn't an artist but a Russian poet. This struck her as even more romantic. She walked back with me to my hotel and asked to be allowed to see the way I lived. My thoughts were occupied with Chantal, the painter, and I said dryly that I had to work. 'Go ahead and work, I'll just sit quietly.' The mess in my room appalled her and she tidied it up; she took my torn socks out of a drawer and mended them, sewed the missing buttons on my shirts and went away satisfied: she had been to Bohemia. And I sat in the cold room and wrote poems: 'Pigs' heads pale like ladies dozed at the butcher's, depression oozed from their immobile eyes down on the tear-stained marble. If you like I'll make you a present of a stuffed hog or a chocolate box with views of Rheims cathedral . . .'

As I think of the Rotonde, these odd incidents come involuntarily to mind; yet the reality was far sadder and far more serious. In the evening Modigliani did portrait drawings on writing paper, sometimes twenty in a row. But, after all, that is not what made him Modigliani. We did not work at the Rotonde but in unheated studios, garrets and filthy furnished lodgings which went under the name of hotels. We came to the Rotonde because we were drawn to each other. It was not the bizarre events that attracted us, nor even were we inspired by bold aesthetic theories: we simply sought each other's company, made kin by our feeling that the world was out of joint.

Later I shall speak of Picasso, Modigliani, Léger and Rivera. Now I want to jump ahead, to try to understand what was happening to us and to the art which was our life.

The Italian Futurists were saying that the museums should be burnt down. Modigliani refused to sign their manifesto: he made no secret of his love for the Tuscan old masters. Picasso spoke fervently, now of El Greco, now of Goya, now of Velasquez. Max Jacob read Rutebeuf's poems to me. None of us repudiated the art of the past, but often we were tormented, asking ourselves whether art was necessary in our time, although we could not live without it even for a day.

The people who met at the Rotonde were not adherents of a particular movement or propagandists for the latest 'ism'; there is nothing in common between the dry, monochrome Cubism which Rivera practised at the time and Modigliani's lyrical painting, or between Léger and Soutine. Later, art historians invented the label 'School of Paris'. To my mind it would be more correct to call it 'the terrible school of life', a school through which we passed in Paris.

The revolution made by the Impressionists and after them by Cézanne was confined to art. In his life, Manet was not a rebel but a man of the world. Cézanne saw nothing but nature, canvas and paints. When the whole of France was seething at the time of the Dreyfus affair he was at a loss to understand how his old friend Zola could concern himself with such trivialities. The rebellion of artists and of the poets associated with them in the years preceding the First World War was of a different character. It was directed not only against aesthetic canons but also against the society in which we lived. The Rotonde was not a place of debauchery but a seismographic station where men recorded impulses not perceptible to others. On the whole, the French police were not so far out in regarding the Rotonde as a menace to public order.

As always happens, some of those who participated in the rebellion withdrew from it later on, in the changed circumstances, faded and dropped out of sight; some others—Modigliani, Guillaume Apollinaire—died young; others carried the frenzy of those years to the end of their days: their life stories marched in step with the history of the age.

The most difficult thing for a writer is to think of the title for a book. Titles are usually either pretentious or too generalised. But the title *Poems about the Eves* satisfies me far more than the poems themselves. The years I speak of really were 'eves'. Many describe them as an epilogue. There are white nights when it is difficult to determine

the source of the light that excites and disturbs, prevents one from sleeping, favours lovers: is it evening, twilight or dawn? In nature, this mingling of light does not last long: half an hour, an hour. But history is in no hurry. I grew up in a dual light and have lived in it all my life, into my old age.

## 20

I RARELY had a conversation with Modigliani without his reading to me a few tercets from the *Divina Commedia*: Dante was his favourite poet. In *Poems About the Eves* there is one dated April 1915: 'You sat on a low step, Modigliani, your cries were those of a stormy petrel . . . Oily gleam of lowered lamp, blueness of warm hair. Suddenly I heard the thunderous Dante's dark works roaring out, spilling over . . .' Dante is not always thunderous; I remember some lines from the *Purgatorio*: the poet and his companion, having climbed a height, sit down and gaze quietly upon the path that lies behind them. I should like to be sitting now with the living Modigliani (Modi, as his friend called him). Today he has been made the hero of a vulgar film. Some entertaining novels have been written about him. But how could a film director sit on a low stone step meditating on the tortuous ways of a stranger's life?

So the legend was created about the hungry, dissolute, perpetually drunken painter, the last of the Bohemians who, in the rare hours between two drinking parties, painted curious portraits, died in poverty and became famous after death.

All this is true and all of it is false. It is a fact that Modigliani went hungry, that he drank and swallowed grains of hashish; but the reason for this was not love of debauchery nor longing for an 'artificial paradise'. He did not in the least enjoy going hungry—he always ate with a hearty appetite—and he never sought martyrdom. More than others, perhaps, he was made for happiness. He loved the sweet Italian language, the gentle landscape of Tuscany, the art of her old masters. He did not start with hashish. Of course he could have painted portraits that might have pleased the critics and buyers; he would have had money, a good studio and recognition. But Modigliani knew neither how to lie nor how to adapt himself; everyone who met him knows how very straightforward and proud he was.

I have seen him on bad days and on brighter ones; I have seen him calm, extremely courteous, clean-shaven, with a pale face that had just a touch of coarseness about it, and gentle, friendly eyes. I have also

seen him frantic, with black bristles sprouting all over his face: this Modigliani screamed piercingly, like a bird—perhaps like an albatross; it was not, after all, just for the sake of allegory that I mentioned the stormy petrel in my poem.

(Modigliani liked Baudelaire's poem about the albatross being mocked by sailors: '*Ce voyageur ailé, comme il est gauche et veule!*')")

I have said that he was handsome: women could not take their eyes off him. His good looks always struck me as Italian. He was, however, a Sephardic Jew: a descendant of those Jews who, after their expulsion from Spain, settled in Provence, Italy and the Balkans.

Once I happened to go with Modigliani into a café on the boulevard Pasteur. Until that moment he had been working tranquilly. Respectable men were playing cards at a neighbouring table. I was copying some poems which Modigliani had shown me and heard nothing of what went on. Suddenly he leapt to his feet: 'Shut up! I'm a Jew and I could tell you a thing or two. Understand?' The card players said nothing. Modigliani paid for our coffees and said loudly: 'A pity we came in here, for it's a place where swine go.' When we had left I asked him what it was they had been saying at the next table. 'Always the same old thing,' said Modi. 'It's infuriating to be doing nothing but pushing a paintbrush about: their faces will need bashing for another three hundred years.'

He told me that his grandfather had been a native of Rome, had wanted to grow vines and had bought a small plot; but the law prohibited Jews from owning land. His grandfather, enraged, had moved to Leghorn where many Jewish families had lived from time immemorial. Modi read me some sonnets in Italian by Emmanuele Romano, a Jewish poet of the fourteenth century: mocking, bitter poems that were nevertheless full of the love of life. He told me how the Romans had celebrated the carnival once upon a time: the Jewish community had been obliged to put up a Jewish runner who, stripped naked and to the yells and whistles of the merry crowd—including bishops, ambassadors and ladies—had to run three times round the city. (At the time I wrote a poem about this.)

I met Modigliani in 1912, when he was already an old Parisian. At one of our first meetings he made a drawing of me, which everyone thought a very good likeness. After that he drew me often: I had a whole folder of his drawings. (In the summer of 1917 I was returning to Russia with a group of political émigrés. In England we were told

that no manuscripts, drawings, paintings or even books could be taken out of the country. I selected whatever was valuable among my things—a still-life by Picasso, Baratynsky's *Edda* with his dedication, Modigliani's drawings—and left a small suitcase containing these things for temporary safe-keeping with the embassy of the Provisional Government. The government certainly turned out to be provisional, but the suitcase was lost for ever.)

The room where Anna Akhmatova lives in an old house in Leningrad is small, austere and bare. But on one of the walls there hangs a drawing by Modigliani: a portrait of the young Akhmatova. She told me how, in Paris, she met an exceedingly modest young Italian who asked permission to draw her. That was in 1911. Akhmatova was not yet Akhmatova, just as Modigliani was not yet Modigliani. But in the drawing (though in its manner it differs from later drawings by Modigliani) one can already detect the precision of draughtsmanship, lightness of line and poetic truth.

The hero of the film and the novels is Modigliani in his moments of despair and madness. But, when all is said and done, Modigliani not only drank at the Rotonde, not only drew on coffee-stained paper: he spent days, months and years in front of his easel painting his nudes and portraits.

I was always astonished by the width of his reading. I don't think I have ever met another painter who loved poetry so deeply. He could recite by heart verses from Dante, Villon, Leopardi, Baudelaire, Rimbaud. His canvases do not represent fortuitous visions: they are a world apprehended by an artist who has a rare combination of childlikeness and wisdom. When I say 'childlikeness' I do not, of course, mean infantilism, a native lack of ability or a deliberate primitivism; by childlikeness I mean freshness of perception, immediacy, inner purity. All his portraits are like their models (I judge by those I knew—Zborowski, Picasso, Rivera, Max Jacob, the English writer Beatrice Hastings, Soutine, the poet Frans Hellens, Dilevsky, and finally Modi's wife Jeanne). He was never distracted by any trappings or anything external; his canvases reveal the nature of the person. Diego Rivera, for instance, is large and heavy, almost savage; Soutine retains his tragic expression of incomprehension, the constant yearning for suicide. But what is extraordinary is that Modigliani's models resemble each other; it is not a matter of an assumed style or some superficial trick of painting, but of the artist's view of the world. Zborowski with

the face of a good-natured, shaggy sheepdog; the lost Soutine; the tender Jeanne in her shift, an old man, a model, somebody with a moustache: all are like hurt children, albeit some of these children have beards or grey hair. I believe that the world seemed to Modigliani like an enormous kindergarten run by very unkind adults.

Of course there is truth in the Modigliani legend and it is easy to understand why his life story should attract a scriptwriter. A little while ago I read in a newspaper that one of his small portraits was sold at an auction in America for a hundred thousand dollars. Modigliani never spent so much as a quarter of that sum during his whole life. How many times have I seen old Rosalie, the owner of a tiny Italian restaurant in the rue Campagne-Première, receive a drawing from Modigliani in exchange for a piece of meat or a plate of spaghetti; she did not want to take it, but he insisted: he was not a beggar. And Rosalie, looking at the scraps of paper covered with fine, discontinuous lines, would sigh sorrowfully: '*Dio mio!*' It is also true that even enlightened art connoisseurs failed to understand him. Those who liked Impressionism could not bear Modigliani's indifference to light, the clean definition of his drawing, his arbitrary distortion of nature. Everyone was talking about Cubism; painters who were sometimes obsessed by the idea of destruction were at the same time engineers, architects and designers. To the lovers of Cubism, Modigliani was an anachronism.

Biographers note that 1914 was a successful year for Modigliani: he met the art dealer Zborowski who understood and liked his works at once. But Zborowski was himself a poor devil: a young Polish poet who had come to Paris dreaming of a voyage to Cythera and found himself in the doldrums—in front of a cup of coffee at the Rotonde. He had no money. He rented a small flat where he lived with his wife; Modigliani often worked there. Then Zborowski would put his canvases under his arm and run round Paris from morning until night, trying in vain to interest genuine art dealers in the Italian painter's work.

Finally, it is also true that Modigliani sometimes fell a prey to unrest, horror and rage. I remember a night in a studio littered with rubbish; there was a crowd of people including Rivera, Voloshin and various models. Modigliani was very excited. His friend Beatrice Hastings kept saying with a pronounced English accent: 'Modigliani, don't forget that you're a gentleman. Your mother is a lady of the

highest social standing.' These words acted on Modi like a spell. He sat in silence for a long time. Then he could not bear it any longer and started breaking down the wall. First he scratched away the plaster, then he tried to pull out the bricks. His fingers were bloody and in his eyes there was such despair that I could not stand it and went out into the filthy courtyard strewn with fragments of sculpture, broken crockery and empty crates.

During the war he often came in the evenings to a restaurant where painters used to eat. He sat on the stairs, sometimes declaiming Dante, sometimes talking of the slaughterhouse, of the end of civilization, of poetry, of anything except painting. At one time he was very interested in the prophecies of Nostradamus, a French doctor who lived in the sixteenth century. He assured me that Nostradamus had foreseen the French Revolution, the triumph and the collapse of Napoleon, the end of the rule of the Papacy, the unification of Italy. He also quoted some prophecies which had not yet been fulfilled: 'The Italian republic, that's a trifle. But here's something more important: people will be exiled to islands, a cruel ruler will seize power, everyone who does not learn to keep silent will be put in prison and the extermination of mankind will begin.' Pulling a battered book out of his pocket he began to cry out: 'Nostradamus foresaw military aviation. Soon all those who dare to smile or weep at the wrong moment will be sent to the poles—some to the North Pole, others to the South.'

When the first news of the revolution in Russia arrived, Modi came running to me, embraced me and began screeching enthusiastically (sometimes I could not make out what he was saying).

A young girl, Jeanne, who looked like a schoolgirl, began coming to the Rotonde. She had light eyes and light hair, and she gazed timidly at the artists. They said she was studying painting. Shortly before my departure for Russia I saw Modigliani and Jeanne walking in the boulevard Vaugirard. They were holding hands and smiling. I thought: Modi has found his happiness at last.

I came back to Paris in May 1921. Everyone was in a hurry to tell me all the news. 'Good heavens, don't you know Modigliani's dead?' I knew nothing about my friends from the Rotonde. Modi was always coughing, always felt cold. He contracted a lung disease. His organism was exhausted. He died in hospital at the beginning of 1920. Jeanne did not come to the cemetery; when, after the funeral, his friends went back to the Rotonde they learned that Jeanne had thrown herself

out of a window an hour earlier. Modi's little daughter—another Jeanne—was left.

That is all. Friends shared the expense of Modigliani's funeral. A year later an exhibition of his work opened in Paris. Books were written about him; men grew rich on his pictures. However, that story is so commonplace that it is not worth mentioning.

I have met Modigliani in museums throughout the world—in New York and Stockholm, Paris and London. He sometimes painted nudes, but most of his works were portraits. He created a multitude of people: their sadness, their frozen immobility, their hunted tenderness, their air of doom move the gallery visitors.

It may be that some zealots of realism will say that Modigliani played tricks with nature, that the women in his portraits have too elongated necks and arms. As if a painting were an anatomical drawing! Do not thoughts, emotions, passions alter the proportions? Modigliani was not a remote observer; he did not contemplate people from a distance, but lived with them. These are portraits of people who loved, longed and suffered; his dates are not only milestones marking his progress as an artist, they are the milestones of an epoch: 1910–20. It is absurd to say that Modigliani did not know how many vertebrae there are to a neck. He studied this for many years in the art schools of Leghorn, Florence and Venice. But he knew something else as well: for instance, how many years there are to a single twelvemonth such as 1914. And if apparently age-old conceptions of human values were changing, how could an artist fail to see his model's face changed?

Modigliani's canvases will have much to tell later generations. As for me—I look, and the friend of my distant youth stands before me. How much love for people, how much anxiety for them he felt! They keep on writing: 'He drank, he brawled, he died.' But that is not the point. The point is not even in his fate, as instructive as an ancient parable. His fate was closely bound up with the fates of others; and if anyone wants to understand the drama of Modigliani, let him remember, not hashish but the gas chamber; let him think of Europe lost and frozen, of the devious paths of the century, of the fate of any of Modigliani's models round whom the iron ring was already closing.

## 21

THE SUMMER of 1914 started well for me. I wrote several poems which I thought less imitative than earlier ones (later I included them in *Poems About the Eves*).

The summer was unusually bright and hot, with fitful heavy showers. Everything was brilliantly in bloom. Unexpectedly I received payment from two journals and decided to go to Holland; one wasn't going to spend the money on a winter coat, after all. I was drawn to Holland by Rembrandt, by what I had heard of Dutch life and by the friendly Dutchwomen in white caps whose photographs were exhibited in the travel bureau.

(Today I find it difficult to imagine that once upon a time you could travel to another country without filling in a form and spending a week in a state of uncertainty: will they or won't they let you in. But it was during the war that I first heard the word 'visa'. Before that, you weren't even asked for your passport: the customs men just came into the compartment.)

Holland was quiet and picturesque. The caps really were white; the sails of windmills really did revolve; the peasants puffed slowly at their long clay pipes; well-groomed cows chewed the tender green grass in a melancholy fashion, and cheese was always served for breakfast. In short, the guidebook I had bought in Paris had not let me down.

There were museums everywhere, and every morning, having swallowed as many slices of bread and butter and cheese as possible so as not to need any lunch, I would set off for one of them. Dutch painting is usually described as extremely realistic; they say that it was inspired by everyday life. On the face of it the subjects of the pictures confirm this view: portraits, genre scenes, landscapes with the combination—*de rigueur* in that country—of flat earth, water and sky, and still-lives. But in Italy the museum is not separate from the street where you find it; art in Italy merges into the surrounding life. In Holland, on the other hand, I was astonished by the divorce between the art of the past and present-day reality. The peasants were completely matter-of-fact; the Amsterdam stock exchange appeared to be a national

institution; on weekdays everybody read the market bulletins, on Sundays the prayerbook; the beach near The Hague was crowded with ample ladies. In the midst of all this stood the museum buildings, and inside them hung canvases by Rembrandt, as they also hung in the Louvre and the Hermitage.

I wondered how to explain this divorce. It seems that even three centuries ago Dutch artists lived in a state of far greater inner isolation than the Italians; in executing their commissions and depicting genre scenes which everyone could understand, they were inspired by the act of painting. In 1914 the word 'formalism' was applied only to *The Man in a Case*; but, to use today's terminology, I should say that the old Dutch masters struck me as formalist. I admired them; but when I left the museum, my thoughts were my own.

None of this is true of Rembrandt: I could not stop looking at his works; the unrest in them infected me. It is clear that he did not live apart from the rest of mankind; his passionate nature worried and sometimes affronted his contemporaries. I doubt whether the other painters of the seventeenth century cared very much for tradesmen or bishops; but the flourishing merchants liked the painters' canvases, for which they paid good money and with which they embellished their houses. Today, Rembrandt's name is given to streets, hotels and brands of cigars. But in his lifetime it was very different: his property was distrained and auctioned, and there were years when no one knocked at the door of his house.

I wandered along the canals, past the neat houses and, paying no attention to the passers-by, thought of the artist's fate. Perhaps it had something to do with the climate of Holland? I had recently read the letters of Descartes to Guez de Balzac. Descartes described how he spent his time in Holland (he lived there for twenty years): 'Every day I walk among a multitude of people and feel the same freedom, the same repose as you do when you walk along your drives, and the people I see are to me just like the trees you see in your forest.' I recall Descartes for another reason as well: it was at that time that I began reading him for the first time and thinking about the essence of doubt. *Cogito, ergo sum.*

It was a hot day. I was walking, as usual, in an Amsterdam street, without looking at the faces of passers-by. Suddenly something began to puzzle me: everyone was reading the papers in a state of agitation, talking more loudly than usual and crowding round the tobacconists'

shops, where the latest news was posted. What had happened? I tried to decipher the news; the word *oorlog* kept recurring; it was not like any German or French word. At first I thought I would go back to the hotel and read a little Descartes, but I was too restless. I bought a French paper and was dumbfounded. I had not read any papers for a long time and did not know what was going on in the world. *Le Matin* said that Austro-Hungary had declared war on Serbia; France and Russia were expected to mobilise that very day. England was silent. I felt as though everything were caving in—the little white houses, the windmills, the stock exchange.

I tried to cash some Russian money (I had twenty roubles). But they told me at the banks that only gold coins could be changed since the previous day. I had not enough money to pay the hotel; I left my bag behind and ran to the station.

During the night of 1st August I reached the last Belgian station. No trains were going through to France any longer. The Belgians, when asked, replied that their country would remain neutral at all costs (the next day, the Germans invaded it). The frontier had to be crossed on foot. Day was breaking. We walked among heavy golden ears of corn, then over a green meadow; larks were singing. My travelling companions—Frenchmen—said nothing. A herd of cows lumbered along the empty road. Cowbells tinkled. At last a man appeared in the distance: it was a French frontier guard. For some reason he fired a shot into the sky and this shot amid the silence of a village morning made a tremendous impression on me: I suddenly realised that my life had been cleft in two. Some soldiers began singing the *Marseillaise* rather tunelessly. German men and women, with children, were walking in the opposite direction, trying to get to Germany. The frontier guard said to me in an indeterminate way, whether accusingly or carelessly, it was impossible to tell: '*Et voilà la guerre.*'

I looked back for the last time at the white empty road, the herd of sheep and the little Belgian village. I did not know that a few days later the village would have been burned down and German divisions would be passing southwards along the road. I did not know that the war would be a long one (everyone was saying 'a month or two'). But I felt that everything in the world had turned upside down. Today I know: just as the striking of a clock conventionally marks the beginning of a new year, so the aimless shot fired by the frontier

guard somewhere near Erquelines marked the beginning of a new age.

That summer's day has remained forever in my memory. People often speak of the importance of first love in a man's life. But this was the first real war, both for me and for the people round me. Forty-four years is a long time. Those who had taken part in the Franco-Prussian war had died or grown old; young people laughed at their tales. Not one of us knew what war meant.

Before the Second World War there were long preparations; there was time to grow accustomed to the idea that it was inevitable. On the eve of Munich the French witnessed a dress rehearsal: farewells to reservists, the blackout. But the First World War exploded suddenly: the earth began to quake under our feet. Only many weeks later did I remember that the *Echo de Paris* had demanded the return of Alsace and Lorraine, that even when I was still at home in Russia I had attacked the alliance between France and the Tsar—'the Tsar has received an advance on cannon fodder'—and that my baker had often said to me: 'What we need is a proper war, then everything will get put right again at once.' And, passing through Germany, I had seen the arrogant German officers. Everything had been prepared for a long time, but the preparations had been going on somewhere out of sight. The outbreak was sudden.

Some zouaves took me along in their goods wagon. (I had previously seen the legend '40 men, 8 horses' in Russia, '36 mēn' in France, but I had never bothered to think what kind of 'men' were meant.) We were cramped and hot. The train moved slowly, stopping at sidings, waiting for troop trains going the other way. At the stations women were seeing off their mobilised men; many cried. Litre bottles of red wine were thrust into our hands. The zouaves drank straight from the bottles and passed them to me. Everything turned and whirled. The soldiers tried to pluck up courage. The words 'Joy Ride to Berlin' were chalked on many of the wagons.

The French soldiers wore the absurd old uniform: blue tunic and bright red trousers. The war still figured in our minds as the old battle-scene painters had shown it: rearing horses, a standard-bearer on a height and a general waving a white-gloved hand. Endless stories, boastful or comic, were told. Never are so many fairy tales invented as during the first weeks of a war; at that time I did not know this and believed everything I heard. Some said that the French had occupied

Metz, that a thousand Germans had been killed, that Russian Cossacks were galloping on Berlin; others swore that the Germans had invaded France and were approaching Nancy, England had declared her neutrality, a French cruiser had been sunk and the Tsar had reached agreement with Wilhelm at the last moment. No one knew anything. The zouaves roared out their songs, some sad, some dirty.

The Gare du Nord was like a gipsy encampment. People on the platforms ate, slept, cried.

I called on some Russian friends. Everybody shouted and nobody listened to anybody else. One man kept repeating: 'France is liberty, I shall go and fight for liberty.' Another droned morosely: 'It isn't the Tsar, it's Russia . . . If they'll have me I'll go, if not I'll enlist as a volunteer over here.'

It is difficult to describe what was happening in those days. Everyone, it seems, had lost their heads. One by one, the shops closed. People marched in the middle of the road yelling 'To Berlin! To Berlin!' They were not youths or groups of nationalists; no, everybody marched: old women, students, workers, bourgeois; they marched with flags and flowers and sang the *Marseillaise*, straining their voices. The whole of Paris abandoned its houses and rushed into the streets, saying goodbye, seeing people off, whistling, shouting. It was as though a human river had burst its banks and flooded the world. When, at night, I fell exhausted into my bed, the same shouts still came in through the window: 'To Berlin! To Berlin!'

I could not tear myself away from the piles of newspapers, re-reading everything, although the news was the same in all of them: political nuances had disappeared. Jaurès had been killed, but his successors wrote that war against German militarism was a necessity. Jules Guesde called for war to the victorious end. Hervé, who was famous for the fact that his paper *La Guerre sociale* had urged soldiers to disobey their generals, wrote: 'This is a just war and we shall fight to the last cartridge.' German Social-Democrats voted military credits. Bethmann-Hollweg called the agreement on Belgian neutrality 'a scrap of paper'. The King of the Belgians appealed to his people to defend their motherland; he had a nice face and all the papers published his portrait. Liège resisted heroically. Anatole France asked to be sent to the front. He was seventy, and, of course, they kept him in the rear but issued him a soldier's greatcoat. Thomas Mann, glorifying the deeds of the German army, recalled Frederick the Great: 'This

is the war of all Germany.' Newspapers reported universal enthusiasm in Petersburg. A group of S.D.s and S.R.s urged émigrés to join the French army as volunteers: 'Let us repeat Garibaldi's gesture . . . If Wilhelm falls, the hated autocracy in Russia will collapse.'

I opened *La Patrie*, searching anxiously for an answer. All round me people shouted, wept, sang: 'Forward, sons of the fatherland.'

I was living in a cheap little hotel called the *Nice* in the boulevard Montparnasse. Shortly before the War the hotel proprietor had married a pleasant young Alsatian girl, almost a child. He was called up on the fourth or fifth day of the War. He brought his oldest lodgers together (they were all émigrés from Russia)—Lapinski, Martov and myself—and asked us to help his young wife if she got into difficulties as a former German national. (He was particularly worried because his wife's brother, a lad of fifteen, who did not know any French, had come to stay with them and was stranded in Paris.) He promised that we should not be charged rent for our rooms until the end of the War.

I met the painter Léger who said that he had been called up as a sapper and would be leaving the next day. I automatically asked how his exhibition had gone off. He grinned and made a deprecating gesture.

My friend Tikhon Sorokin came to tell me the latest news: tomorrow they would begin enlisting foreign volunteers at the Hôtel des Invalides. He would go first thing in the morning.

Sitting and seeing others go was worse than anything. I said to Tikhon: 'I'll come too.' He spoke to me at great length about the meaning of the war for Russia. I cannot remember the conversation; I remember only that, as he left, he said: 'Brother, you really are cracked.'

I could not think and, consequently, if Descartes is right, I no longer existed.

## 22

THE LARGE square in front of the Hôtel des Invalides was crowded. Italians, Poles, Greeks, Spaniards, Rumanians had formed columns bearing banners and national flags. There were many Russians, some with tricolour flags, others with red banners. The first wartime queue had formed. Thinking now of the fate of those volunteers one may say that it was a death queue; but all were cheerful, singing and shouting defiantly: 'To Berlin!' It was very hot. People drank lemonade and, wiping their sweating faces, started to sing all over again.

I was at the end of the queue and it was evening when I reached the table at which sat a major with a big moustache. An army doctor looked at me gloomily and held a stethoscope to my heart; then he shouted 'Next!' I thought they were going to issue me with a pair of red trousers, but the sergeant swore at me: 'What's the matter—don't you understand French?' It turned out that I had been rejected. I don't know what defects in my health the army doctor had discovered; perhaps I had simply struck him as too weedy. One cannot with impunity prefer poetry to beef for a period of three or four years. I am convinced that, had I been examined a few months later, I should have been considered perfectly fit: any commodity, including cannon fodder, has only to be in short supply for people to become less difficult to please.

I saw many faces I knew in the crowd; Russian émigrés whom I used to see in the Gobelins library as well as Rotonde regulars. At that time I did not know V. G. Fink, but he must have stood in the same queue with me.

That night Kisling came to the Rotonde in uniform. Libion embraced him and stood us all a round of champagne; we drank to victory.

Tikhon told me that he was being sent to Blois: that was where the volunteers would be trained. I envied him. It was horrible to be an onlooker in those days. We saw the volunteers off at the station, singing the *Marseillaise*, 'Boldly, comrades', and various sentimental ditties.

Altogether there was a lot of singing during those days, at the

railway stations, in the streets and in the cafés. Evidently war has its own laws: during the early weeks everyone sings, drinks, cries and also, catches spies. I was taken to the police station several times on account of my name; each time I had to prove that although my name was, indeed, Ehrenburg, I was nevertheless not a German. A mass of unlikely stories were told: of the German intelligence agent in woman's clothing arrested on the point of taking secret plans out of the country, of the closet at the Elysée palace where a spy had hidden himself with a camera. Slogans were everywhere: '*Taisez-vous! Mefiez-vous! Les oreilles ennemies vous écoutent.*'

The 'Maggi' dairies were looted. Count Karolyi was arrested although he opposed the Habsburgs. People were in a fever. Everyone longed for victory and assured each other that Strasburg would be taken in a few days' time.

Suddenly sinister rumours began to spread through the city: a battle had been lost, the army was retreating in disorder, the Germans were advancing on Paris.

Towards evening a German plane came over, to intimidate rather than to destroy. The Germans called it *Taube*, dove; this name astonished me more than anything else. After all, it is not Picasso who invented the peace dove; it is part of a very old story about a great flood, a little ark and an olive branch which a dove brought in its beak to a handful of despairing people. The Parisians called gaily: 'Look, there's the *Taube*,' ran out into the streets and stared at the sky; it was all a novelty.

In the wealthy districts preparations for departure were afoot. Large trunks were carried out of houses. Chambermaids and menservants answered breathlessly: 'to Nice', 'to Toulouse', 'to Pau'. Then the shutters closed and all was quiet. The government moved to Bordeaux.

'They've let us down good and proper,' was a remark heard everywhere. Some blamed Poincaré, others Caillaux, others the generals. The communiqués reminded one of 'hermetic poetry': only the initiated could decipher them. But besides the communiqués there were other sources of information. The wounded were brought to Paris, the first deserters appeared. They said the Germans had far more artillery, everyone had lost their heads, the regiments were in a state of confusion. Amateurs of strategy were saying that the high command had been very foolish in attacking Alsace for no obvious reason and leaving the left flank uncovered.

A late summer night, hot and dark. I am standing near the *Closerie des Lilas*. Everyone is out in the street: soldiers are marching from south to north, from the Porte d'Orléans to the Gare de l'Est. Women embrace them, crying, screaming: 'Save us!' On the bayonets there are dahlias and asters. Songs, tears, small paper lanterns. I stand there all night, and all night the soldiers pass. No, there is no cause for panic, the French still have large reserves. But why are they retreating? One can understand nothing, not communiqués, nor songs, nor tears.

The taxis vanished: General Gallieni had requisitioned them to carry reinforcements to the Marne. This, too, was a novelty: no one as yet dreamt of motorised infantry. Technology was weaker in those days, but not the imagination: everything seemed grandiose, apocalyptic.

The hotel proprietor's brother-in-law, Emil, came to do my room next morning. Although he was from Alsace he made no secret of his devotion to the Kaiser. The Russians he hated. He often told me that I did not know how to do anything, all Russians were the same and it was time that somebody established order in Russia. I used to laugh at him a little; he was only a boy, not yet fifteen. That morning he all but threatened me with his scrubbing brush, saying triumphantly: 'The Germans are at Meaux. They'll be in Paris tomorrow.' I disbelieved him, but nevertheless I ran out to buy a paper; the communiqué, as always, was obscure. I went to the Rotonde. Libion was sitting there in utter gloom, and did not even answer my greeting. A Pole I knew rushed in and whispered breathlessly: 'They're at Meaux.'

I remembered Meaux. I had been there once with Katya. It was thirty kilometres from Paris. Damn, why had the army doctor found something wrong with my health? I was perfectly able to walk. Even to run.

The rest is known: there was a counter-offensive; Charles Péguy was killed in the battle of the Marne; the Germans retreated and dug themselves in. (Later I was to see the wooden cross with the inscription 'Lieutenant Charles Péguy', and next to it a milestone marked 34: thirty-four kilometres to Paris.)

A solemn mass was celebrated at Notre-Dame. The congregation shouted: '*Vive le Seigneur! Vive Joffre!*' Who could find this amusing at the time? Only the gargoyles, perhaps; but, being made of stone, they sat thinking in silence, as is their allotted function.

The Germans retreated, but not so very far; the newspapers,

wishing to dispel dangerous optimism, wrote: 'We must remember that the Germans are at Noyon.' Noyon was roughly ninety kilometres from Paris. 'The Germans are at Noyon' became a refrain, but gradually it lost its power: life was claiming its rights.

I still read dozens of newspapers every day: somebody, somewhere, might think and therefore be. I looked for what the writers were saying. The warlike speeches of Kipling, Hauptmann and Loti caused me no surprise. I laughed at d'Annunzio's operatic flourishes demanding blood. But others too—Verhaeren, Anatole France, Mirbeau, Wells, Mann—repeated the things Poincaré and von Bülow were saying. In some of the papers there were blank spaces: censored articles or news items (for some reason the French had given the censorship a girl's name, 'Anastasia'). These white spaces encouraged me a little: someone knew the truth though they could not tell it.

Many years have passed since that time and many things have happened: fascism, the Second World War, Auschwitz, Hiroshima; the utter confusion that seized me in the autumn of 1914 may today seem naïve. But a man who has never smelt gunpowder is more profoundly shaken by the first dead body he sees than, later, by the most appalling battlefield. Blok had written as long ago as 1911: 'Revulsion from life and insane love of life, passion for the motherland and hatred of it . . . Black, earthly blood, swelling the veins, destroying all frontiers, promises us unheard-of changes, undreamt-of rebellions.' I sat for hours over piles of newspapers. Everything was shrouded in a fog of lies, violence and stupidity.

Of course the First World War was only a rough draft. Various governments published collections of documents—blue books, white books, yellow books—trying to prove that what had happened was not their fault. As they destroyed Rheims cathedral, the town hall of Arras and the medieval Cloth Hall at Ypres, the Germans swore that they were not guilty of vandalism. A quarter of a century later, bomber commands no longer looked, however cursorily, at books on the history of art. Germans, French and Russians alike were shocked by the treatment of prisoners of war; it did not enter anyone's head that during the next war the fascists would calmly murder all those unfit for work. American papers published indignant articles by Germans: troops under Archduke Nicholas were forcibly evacuating Polish Jews. Himmler was fourteen at the time; he was playing hopscotch and not thinking of how to run Auschwitz and Majdanek. On

22nd April 1915 the Germans used poison gas for the first time. Everyone thought this an outrageous thing and, indeed, it was an atrocity. How could we have imagined the atom bomb?

(However, German chauvinists of the time already gave signs that the future would be horrifying. In 1950 Professor Madsen, the well-known Danish microbiologist—he was then eighty—told me of an interesting experience he had had during the First World War. He had worked for the Danish Red Cross inspecting food parcels sent from Germany to German prisoners of war in Russia. In one of the parcels he had found bacilli intended for the contamination of cattle. He added that he was sure that the German High Command had had nothing to do with this attempt at bacteriological warfare; the sending of the parcel had, in his opinion, been an individual act.)

I remember how everyone laughed at *Le Matin* for saying that the Russians were at five days' march from Berlin. But no one was disturbed by reading in the same paper that 'Goethe's genius was akin to poison gas'. A friend brought back a German paper from the front; in it I read that the Russians were *Pechenegs*, that all Russian culture had been created by Germans and that the indigenous population was fit only for rough physical labour.

Someone gave me a book by the French baroness Michaud. She invented a new term, the 'Jew-Boches'; the chief 'Jew-Boche', according to her, was that inveterate enemy of France, the poet Heine. The Baroness also denounced Romain Rolland and Georg Brandes. Soon afterwards a man from the front showed me an issue of a Munich newspaper where some journalist set out to prove that Hjalmar Branting and Blasco Ibañez, who sympathised with France, were 'half-Jewish'.

I suddenly understood that although Descartes had expressed very intelligent thoughts, it was not those thoughts that determined the spiritual life of millions of people. Having been bred on the ideas of the nineteenth century, I exaggerated the role of philosophers and writers; that which I had thought to be the flesh and blood of society was only its outer clothing. Civilian jackets had been exchanged for army tunics, humanism for blood-lust, Descartes' doubts for the wilful refusal to engage in thought of any kind.

One day my neighbour, the Polish Socialist Lapinski, came to ask me to translate an item in an Italian newspaper. (Italy was still neutral and many things unknown in France could be found in the Italian

press.) The paper said that the French general staff had, at the request of the Lorraine mine-owners, forbidden the artillery to shell mines held by the Germans. Lapinski said: 'They don't mind shelling people, but they're careful about their property.' He explained that he would use the item for the Russian Socialist paper *Nashe Slovo*<sup>1</sup> which spoke out against the war. Afterwards he brought me this paper regularly; the tone of the articles reminded me of émigré meetings. Lapinsky said that everything that was happening was based on deceit, and that the capitalists could not go on deceiving the people for long. Sometimes I agreed with him, sometimes I began to argue. The war seemed revolting to me; I hated the mine-owners and Poincaré, the pious ladies who gave holy medallions to soldiers and the hypocrisy and cowardice of the people at home. But, at the same time, I repeated to myself the verses of Charles Péguy: 'Blessed are those who fall in the great fight for the four corners of their native earth.' Those 'four corners' would not allow me to go all the way with Lapinski. I liked him very much; we made friends and often talked at night, in his room or in mine. In his room I sometimes met Yuly Martov, the well-known Menshevik, a gentle and attractive man of the utmost integrity. I was surprised how bookish he was, how far from the realities of life. He was wretchedly unhappy over the collapse of the Second International; he coughed, went about in a threadbare overcoat, shivered with cold and, like Lapinski, tried to convince me—though, in reality, he was convincing himself—that the 'reckoning' was 'inevitable'. (I don't suppose he could guess what 'the reckoning' would be like.) I had several talks with Antonov-Ovseyenko. He was inclined to get very excited: 'A swindle, trickery, a scandal, a shambles: they'll have to pay for this!'—and took off his glasses; his myopic eyes were extraordinarily kind. Other members of the editorial board of *Nashe Slovo* were Manuisky and Lozovsky.

I did not understand the events, or other people, or myself.

Jean-Richard Bloch was one of the purest human beings I have ever known; I met him later, in the twenties, and shall have more to say of him; at this point I want to cite him as a witness. His correspondence with Romain Rolland during the First World War has been published recently. Bloch was thirty in 1914 and was called up right away; he was wounded three times; Romain Rolland, eighteen years

<sup>1</sup> 'Our Word'.

older, was living in Geneva and writing articles called *Above the Battle*. During the first months of the War Romain Rolland wrote to his younger friend that he did not want to condemn all Germans out of hand, that he valued the spiritual unity of Europe and that it would be best if the war ended in a stalemate. Bloch in his letters speaks of the Germans' atrocities, of their brutalisation; he believed that this war would be the last—the Kaiser's Germany needed only to be beaten and peace, liberty and happiness would reign. Probably Romain Rolland could see what was happening much more clearly: he lived, if not on a mountain height, at any rate away from the cataclysm. But Bloch's confusion was nearer to me. Once I got hold of the *Journal de Genève* with an article by Romain Rolland. I read it and felt glad: what a good thing that a fine, intelligent man who could say whatever he thought had survived somewhere! Yet I felt that, though it might be only ninety kilometres to Noyon, neutral Switzerland was on another planet.

(At the beginning of the War Barbusse thought and reacted to events in the same way as Jean-Richard Bloch. Romain Rolland's book provoked attacks by chauvinists and a sympathetic response from people who had not lost their heads, but it changed no one. Barbusse's *Le Feu* was not dictated by the reflections of a solitary but by the grief and anger of many people. It was born in the blood and filth of the trenches. It is a book that has played a tremendous part in the awakening of millions of men.)

The war became a war of position. Shivering soldiers in the trenches hunted for lice in their shirts. Typhoid fever set in. There were attacks and counter-attacks for the possession of the notorious 'ferryman's house'. Sappers laid mines in the Forêt d'Argonne. Communiqués were short, but thousands of men died each day.

Letters came from Tikhon. We learned that the Russian volunteers had been posted to the Foreign Legion. Brutal N.C.O.s called the Russians *métèques*, saying that the *métèques* were 'eating the bread of Frenchmen'. (As though the Champagne front were a restaurant!)

The story of the volunteers who went off with flags and songs to defend France is a tragic one. Until the war the Foreign Legion had consisted of criminals of every nationality who changed their names and, on completing their period of service, became French citizens enjoying full rights. Generally the *légionnaires* were sent to the colonies

to put down rebellions. Nothing more need be said to indicate the customs that prevailed in the Legion. The Russians (consisting for the most part of political émigrés, Jews who had left the Jewish Pale after pogroms, and students) insisted on being posted to regular French regiments, but no one listened to them. The persecutions continued. On 22nd June 1915 the volunteers rioted and beat up a few particularly detestable N.C.O.s. A court-martial at Carency sentenced nine Russians to be shot. A. A. Ignatyev, the military attaché at the Russian embassy, horrified by this injustice, managed to get the sentence rescinded, but he was too late. The Russians died with the cry '*Vive la France!*'

This was told me by one of the volunteers whom I met at the Rotonde (he lost a leg at the front and was invalided out). I confess that for the first time I thought without bitterness of the army doctor who had turned me down.

Life in Paris (although it was only ninety kilometres to Noyon) seemed to be running on well-oiled wheels. Clemenceau denounced Poincaré. Briand, an excellent orator, made brilliant speeches. The theatres re-opened. At first they put on patriotic plays for the benefit of wounded soldiers, but eventually they went back to the usual comedies and melodramas. Before the war ladies used to invite one to 'tango teas'. The start of the war marked the inauguration of 'knitting teas': the ladies met to have a good gossip while knitting woollen vests for soldiers. Confectioners made chocolates shaped like artillery shells; jewellers sold golden brooches shaped like guns; the notepaper on which love-letters were written was decorated with tricolour flags.

The young wife of my hotel proprietor started letting rooms by the hour to prostitutes and their clients. Smiling with embarrassment (she was twenty years old), she said: 'What can you do, there's a war on.' Soldiers were given six days' leave from time to time. Thousands of whores loitered round the Gare de l'Est in wait for them. The papers printed advertisements of miraculously effective bulletproof vests. Ferocious women hounded 'column dodgers'; once I saw a man, pursued by two women who refused to believe that he was disabled, take out his glass eye. One-legged invalids skipped along the pavements. In the cabarets they sang songs about the hero who had killed a hundred boches and slept with a hundred beautiful girls.

Artists who had been called up were made to camouflage lorries. It turned out that for the purpose of camouflage it is necessary to break

up the basic forms, and the streets were full of lorries looking like Cubist canvases.

I had no money; private remittances from Russia were not allowed. I worked at night at the Montparnasse goods station, helping to unload shells. (No medical examination was required for this.) At first the workmen laughed at me; I wore a hat with a high crown and they nicknamed me 'The Hat', which sounds insulting in Russian but not in French. Some among my workmates were old, some ill; I made friends with them. During the midnight break we ate—this was called 'breakfast'—and swapped funny stories. In the morning I went to my hotel and slept for half the day, then I went to the Rotonde.

Many of the Rotonde habitués were at the front: Léger, Kisling, Guillaume Apollinaire, Blaise Cendrars, Gleizes. Rivera wanted to volunteer but, like me, he was rejected; they told him his feet were useless. Even before the war the Rotonde had been a place where a sense of catastrophe was served to every customer with his cup of coffee; naturally enough, when these dim presentiments became the everyday life of Europe, Picasso was less surprised than the baker's widow from whom he bought his bread. The baker's widow was childless and soon became adjusted to the war, but suddenly she would begin to sob: 'No, but tell me, whose idea was this? They're all mad, I tell you, and if anyone will explain to me why they're shooting, I'll give him twenty francs on the spot. Do you know how much they're asking for a kilo of butter?' Picasso seemed to have had previous knowledge of all that was going to happen. He worked hard; towards evening he came to the Rotonde where I used to see him as well as Rivera and Modigliani. I was worn out by night work; I read Dostoyevsky and the Apocrypha and wrote poems which became more and more maniacal. A chance visitor might have thought that the Rotonde was in a neutral country, but the fact was that it had lived in the grip of catastrophe long before 2nd August 1914. In 1913 we had all read Blaise Cendrars' poem *La prose du Transsibirien et de la Petite Jehanne de France*. Cendrars wrote:

*J'ai vu les trains silencieux les trains noirs qui  
revenaient de l'Extrême-Orient et qui  
passaient en fantômes*

*Et mon oeil, comme le fanal d'arrière, court  
encore derrière ces trains*

*A Taiga cent mille blessés agonisaient faute de soins*

*J'ai visité les hôpitaux de Krasnoïarsk*

*Et à Khilok nous avons croisé un long convoi de soldats  
fous . . .*

*L'incendie était sur toutes les faces dans tous les cœurs . . .*

(A remarkable man, Blaise Cendrars. One could call him a romantic adventurer if the word 'adventurer' had not lost its real meaning. The son of a Scotsman and a Swiss woman, an outstanding French poet who influenced Apollinaire, a man who knew every trade and had travelled all over the world, he was the yeast of his generation. At sixteen he went to Russia, then to China and India, returned to Russia, went on to America and Canada; he served as a volunteer in the Foreign Legion and lost his right arm in the war; he went to the Argentine, to Brazil and Paraguay; he was a boilerman in Peking, a wandering juggler in France, made the film *La Roue* with Abel Gance, bought lapis lazuli in Persia, was a bee-keeper, a tractor-driver and wrote a book on Rimsky-Korsakoff; I have never seen him depressed, unnerved or without hope.)

Zeppelins began to fly over. On moonlit nights a large airship would be suspended above the city. Shots were fired at it but it scarcely budged: anti-aircraft defences were weak. We admired it and cursed it. Then they started driving us into the *Métro* stations. I heard the shriek of the siren for the first time, and again it was the name that astounded me more than anything else: the sirens of Hellas sang very beautifully—it was their singing that made sailors lose their reason—and the cunning Odysseus put wax in his companions' ears. Whereas the twentieth-century sirens have a most horrible voice; later I was to hear their song many times, in Spain, in Paris and in Moscow. The two World Wars were unlike each other, but sirens in 1941 howled just as they had done in 1915. In the *Métro* there was as much noise as at a country fair. Monkey nuts and photographs of Joffre were sold. Lovers kissed—it would have been silly to waste time on account of some Zeppelin or other. In the mornings we went to look at the gutted houses. Family portraits, fragments of crockery, a crushed baby's cot lay among the debris. The neighbours stood around talking about the victims and crying. Death began to seem like an old acquaintance.

Among the Rotonde habitués there was a woman painter called

Vasilyeva. Besides painting she also made dolls which she sold privately. She was an energetic, sociable woman; during the war she organised a canteen where painters could get cheap meals. Sometimes we would gather there in the evenings to drink, read poetry, make prophecies or simply to shout. I went from time to time and, like all the rest, I prophesied and swore.

A book of Max Jacob's letters has accidentally come into my hands. In 1915 he was writing to Apollinaire, then an N.C.O. in an artillery corps: 'We've got a rather important Russian poet here, Ilya Ehrenburg. He has translated some of his poems for me. He regards himself as a disciple of Jammes, but he reminds me more of you or Heine. In one of his poems there's something like a Last Judgment; an old man sitting in a café is summoned—don't you know the Last Judgment has begun? You must come. But the old man replies: "What's that? The Last Judgment? I can't come. I'm expected for dinner." Not all his poems have the same power, but one wishes there were more poets as strong as this man.' (Somebody, then, thought me strong in those days; but it was the strength of negation. I myself often reflected on my weakness.)

Max Jacob said that he wanted to translate some of my poems into French. We worked at his place. He lived in a small room in Montmartre. As before, he came to the Rotonde very elegantly dressed, but as soon as he was home he took off his smart suit and folded it neatly away in a trunk, putting on a shabby little jacket instead.

Max Jacob had certain features which resembled those of the other Max—Voloshin. Both, besides writing poetry, were interested in art and both adored play-acting, practical jokes and mystification. When Max Jacob was run over by a car and taken to hospital by ambulance, he beseeched the doctors to inform his daughter, although he hadn't got one. He became a convert to Catholicism and affirmed that he had seen visions of Christ and the Virgin Mary. I don't know how much of it was faith and how much a game. He told me in all seriousness that when the Mother of God appeared to him she said, using slang: '*Max, que tu es moche!*' His godfather was Picasso.

Art was Max Jacob's true passion. The poems he wrote were tender and mocking; he now denounced the smug bourgeois, now confessed his sins like a child; he foresaw the rise of physics and astronomy; he had an extraordinary imagination and sensibility which enabled him to foresee many things; he wrote of Ministers and aesthetes who

conducted abstract conversations on pure art and the greatness of France, while the leaden sky above their heads was pierced with lightning.

He lived in an abbey on the Loire, where the Second World War overtook him. Soon Max was obliged to put on the yellow star: he was a Jew. He wrote sad letters to his friends, knowing what lay before him. Paul Eluard, who was in the resistance, once came to tell him how much the young poets of France owed to him.

At the end of 1917, in Moscow, I received a letter from Max Jacob telling me that translations of my poems had been read at a meeting devoted to contemporary poetry at the *Salon d'Automne*. I did not reply: we were living in different worlds.

In January 1945, Paris radio announced that the Germans had killed Max Jacob. Later I found out the details of his death. At the beginning of 1944 the Germans put Max in the transit camp of Drancy, from which Jews were sent on to Auschwitz (all Max's relatives died there). Max was sixty-eight; he fell ill and died at Drancy. Survivors say that he died with dignity, trying to encourage and befriend the other prisoners.

Max Jacob translated my blasphemous poems and then prayed to the Virgin. I went to the goods station every night and unloaded ammunition. Poincaré and Sazonov haggled over who should get Constantinople. Lapinski told me of the Zimmerwald conference. The newspapers still lied, but I no longer read them. I listened avidly to the stories of soldiers on leave and read Quevedo, the Archpriest Avvakum, Villon and Blok. By this time I was utterly emaciated and dressed in heaven knows what. Clemenceau went on denouncing Poincaré. The same village names kept recurring in the communiqués. The women wept. I thought I could smell carrion: the war was beginning to putrefy.

## 23

FERNAND LÉGER came from the front on a regular six days' leave and showed me some drawings he had made in the trenches. I am not an art critic and I am not writing a book on art; but, glancing back, I want to glimpse the future. Let me now quote what I wrote about Léger's war drawings in 1916; it is not an art historian's appraisal but the eye-witness account of a contemporary. 'Léger has brought many drawings back from the front. He drew them while resting, in the dugouts, sometimes in the trenches. Some of the drawings are spattered with rain, some are torn; nearly all are on coarse wrapping paper. Strange, mysterious drawings. True, I have never seen these things, but I feel as if I had seen precisely this, only this. Léger is a Cubist. Sometimes he is schematic, sometimes he frightens us by his fragmentation of everything we see. But what is before me is the face of war. In his drawings there is nothing personal, not even Germans or Frenchmen, just people. Perhaps even there are no people: human beings are subordinated to the machine. Soldiers in helmets; rumps of horses; chimneys of field-kitchens; gun wheels; all these are parts of a mechanism. There are no colours; in war, guns and soldiers' faces lose colour. Straight lines, planes, drawings like blueprints, an absence of anything arbitrary, of anything that is lovably irregular. In war there is no room for dreams. A well-equipped factory for the annihilation of mankind. These scraps of paper are fragments of plans, and the man who drew them is a good-natured Norman, Fernand Léger.'

I remember one evening. We were sitting in the Rotonde, but Léger felt like talking and in wartime the café closed at ten o'clock. We bought some wine and went to Léger's studio. His first wife, pretty laughing Jeanne, twittered merrily; she brought out some glasses and tins of food. Léger suddenly became sombre: he had remembered opening tins with a bayonet stained with blood. After drinking some red wine he brightened up and started talking. 'I've met real people out there. Whom did I know before the War? Apollinaire, Archipenko, Cendrars, Picasso, Max, Modi, yourself. But out there I saw ordinary

people. They even talk differently. Do you know, when I told them I was a painter they assumed I was a house painter. That's something to be proud of, that's no Rotonde for you.'

Afterwards Léger often used to say that the war had been a decisive event in his life. It helped him to find himself. He even said that he had only begun to work independently after the war.

I first met Léger long before the outbreak of war, when he was still living at *La Ruche* next door to Chagall and Archipenko. It was the time of the flowering of Cubism, the influence of which was so great that even Chagall, that poet of Byelorussia's villages, whose art owed a great deal to the barber's shop and greengrocer's signs executed by the local painter, was momentarily swayed.

At that time Léger was friendly with the sculptor Archipenko, who also became a Cubist. Gleizes and Metzinger explained the philosophic and aesthetic meaning of Cubism, talked about Cézanne's exploration in depth, of the necessity for breaking down forms. When I asked Archipenko why his women had square faces he grinned and answered: 'Hmmm . . . just because.' Once I stayed in his studio overnight; we had drunk too much calvados. The sunlight woke me up. Archipenko was fast asleep. I did not want to wake him and, lying on the floor, I gazed at the statues. They looked to me like hybrids: the devil had married a sewing machine. I quietly crept out into the street and was overjoyed to see a ragpicker rummaging in a dustbin. Cubism both attracted and frightened me.

In those days Léger was already a convinced Cubist. I have compared his works of 1913 and 1918; in my opinion there is no break. Altogether there were no abrupt changes in Léger's work. He was very faithful; he never denied his past; he valued old friends. In 1913 he rented a studio in the rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs and worked there for about forty years.

He said that at the front he had met and made friends with real people, but in his drawings those people resemble the parts of a monstrous machine.

Léger was unlike his paintings. Nor was he like the other Rotonde habitués. There was about his appearance something close to nature; doubtless this was a reflection of his origins and childhood—green Normandy, apple trees, cows, a peasant family. He had large hands. He was tall, big-boned, slow of movement. To me he looked like a piece of sculpture, made not out of stone but out of warm, living wood.

What made him akin to the other artists who came to the Rotonde was his hatred of hypocrisy, of decoration, of draperies concealing old, stuffy rooms. But he did not carry within him that cruel, destructive fire that one could sense in the fugitive glance of the young Picasso. Léger in his youth wanted to build, not to destroy. He lived to be seventy-five, and in his life story there are no cataclysms, only the changing of the seasons and his work—constant, inspired work.

Some of the Rotonde customers welcomed the October Revolution as a phenomenon of elemental destruction. But later, having heard that children in Russia were still taught the multiplication table and even that painters of the academic school received encouragement, the *bolchévissants* of yesterday became transformed into enemies of Communism. Léger was a man of a different kind and a different stature. He saluted the October Revolution as the start of the building of a new society. He never went back on his judgments and died a Communist.

His death was sudden. I visited his studio a year before his death; he showed me his new works and seemed hale and well. He worked until the last day and fell like a tall tree with the green leaves still upon it.

Mayakovsky, who went to see him in 1922, wrote: 'Léger—a painter of whom the celebrated pundits of French art speak somewhat patronisingly—made the biggest possible, the most favourable impression upon me. A sturdy man looking like a real artist-worker, who regards his work not as divine predestination but as an interesting, necessary skill on a par with the other skills of life.'

This was the era of the LEF<sup>1</sup>, of Constructivism, of the desire to write poems to end poetry. In the next part of this book I shall speak of Mayakovsky's tragic duel with art. But Léger stood fast. He had wonderfully strong legs and a good, sane mind. Whenever I came to a full stop I went to see Léger, and if he was away from Paris I thought about him: his vitality helped others to live.

I do not know who were the 'celebrated pundits' whom Mayakovsky heard speaking patronisingly of Léger. Unlike the other Rotonde habitués, Léger found buyers early in his career. In 1912 he had already signed a contract with an art dealer. Of course he had his conflict as an artist, but it was different from that of Modigliani or Soutine. Léger's works were bought by connoisseurs but he dreamt of frescoes and

<sup>1</sup> The organisation and journal 'Left Front', an early trend in Soviet literature.

ceramics, of working with an architect, of art for everyone. Long before Le Corbusier's *Esprit Nouveau*, long before the Russian LEF, he was talking about art linked with industrialization.

Unlike the members of LEF, however, Léger recognized the independent significance of art. In 1922, replying to a questionnaire in the journal *Veshch*<sup>1</sup>, he wrote: 'A bad artist copies the object and is in a state of imitation; a good artist represents the object and is in a state of equivalence . . . I am a painter and it is senseless to try to represent three-dimensional shapes on a flat surface. I have abandoned objects. I have taken a pencil . . .'

In 1921 I wrote a book called *And Yet It Moves*, in praise of machines, industrial architecture and Constructivism. Léger did a drawing for the cover. When I try re-reading it now, much of it strikes me as comic if not foolish. In my life I wandered off in many directions. But Léger's path was a straight one and his drawing of 1921 is of a piece not only with his early drawings but also with his last works.

His conflict lay in the fact that he was confronted with drawing-room walls on which art lovers hung his pictures: he never found the walls of new public buildings that he longed for.

Léger believed that contemporary aesthetics were connected with the machine. He said that line was, today, more important than colour. He liked industrial landscapes. He often repeated that art—from Shakespeare to Chaplin—lived by contrasts. I think there is a sharp contrast between Léger's gentleness, lyricism and humanity and his artistic convictions. In his canvases human beings often look like robots, yet he hated the society that turns a man into a machine.

Even in those distant years before the First World War, Léger used to ask me, puzzled: 'Why do you go to museums? You're a young poet, you'd do better to look at aeroplanes, athletes, factories, circus acrobats.' He was a fervent patriot of his age, and many critics call him the most modern artist of the mid-twentieth century. I don't know—perhaps I'm growing old; perhaps, conversely, the second half of our century is unlike the years when Léger was young; but what I love in art today is not the machine but that unique, unrepeatable, living quality that distinguishes one tree from another.

However, I was not talking of our day but of the era of the First

<sup>1</sup> 'The Object'.

World War. Even then, Léger wanted to build. Yet with his boldness, his art, he helped to destroy much that was hypocritical and false. He did this calmly, confidently, without romantic phrases, without being divided against himself, like an architect given the job of re-planning a city and tearing down its mouldering slums.

## 24

I HAVE already described how I became a poet: because I had to. I became a journalist by pure chance, because I lost my temper.

During the war, Russian papers arrived in Paris after some delay, ten issues at a time. I subscribed to *Utro Rossii*<sup>1</sup>. One day I received a batch of papers. First I read the Russian news, then I saw an article on Paris 'from our own correspondent'. I read it and lost my temper. The general spirit of the article did not surprise me: I already knew that the truth was a military secret which must be concealed, and phrases like 'to the victorious end', 'the holy alliance', 'today there are no more rich and poor', etc., had become so familiar that one no longer noticed them. What made me angry was something different: the author of the article did not know that the French uniform had been changed; Clemenceau did not write for *l'Oeuvre*; the café which the journalist described so colourfully had closed down long ago. Why did they call him 'their own correspondent'? Clearly, the article had been written in Moscow. (I was rather simple-minded and did not know how newspapers are made.)

I went to the Rotonde, asked for paper and started describing Paris life. For several days on end, instead of sleeping, I wrote. (At night I still pushed trolleys at the goods station.) I found that writing an article was not so simple. All the time I kept slipping into a cheap poeticism; what came out was long-winded, sentimental and not very intelligent. I tried cutting; the result was too dry. I re-wrote the whole thing.

I think I went on writing for a week. At last I felt that my article was no less good than those that were printed in the papers and I sent it with a polite letter to *Utro Rossii*. There was no reply. I decided that 'our own correspondent' must be a friend of the editor's. I have been stubborn since childhood; I did not dream of a journalist's career, all I wanted was to prove to the editor of *Utro Rossii* that his own correspondent was a myth and that I could write as well as his contributors.

<sup>1</sup> 'Russia's Morning', a Conservative paper.

Obviously I must send the article to another paper. By then the subject of the first article seemed out of date; with enormous effort I wrote a second one and showed it to Max Voloshin. He advised me to send it to the evening edition of the *Birzhevye Vedomosti*,<sup>1</sup> popularly known as *Birzhevka*, where the tone was, if not freer, at least more lively. The name of the paper affronted me; a poet writing for the stock exchange! Max tried to explain that there was no harm in it. The best literary journal was called *Mercure de France*, yet Mercury had been the god of charlatans, confidence tricksters, pedlars and thieves. However hard Max tried, the name *Birzhevka* still nauseated me. However, I sent the article.

Soon I received an extremely long telegram saying that the article had been published, others would be appreciated, and could I please go to the front as a special correspondent; my fee was on its way.

I invited Max, Rivera, Marevna and Chantal; we had a superb dinner at Baty's and then went back to Marevna's place.

I wrote other articles and thought they were better than the first ones. Then the paper arrived with my piece in it. I was so upset that I tore it up at once. The article had been 'edited'; some things had been omitted, others added, all the irony had gone and all that remained was treacle. It is extraordinary how strongly a man will react to an injury that is new to him. Later he gets used to it. And a man gets used to positively anything: poverty, prison, war. But the first time even a small humiliation seems intolerable. I went about thinking one thing only: how the Petersburg poets must despise me for writing 'poems about the eves' and at the same time publishing sugary stories in the *Birzhevka*. Max tried to comfort me: a newspaper was not a collection of poems, and a military censor couldn't be expected to appreciate romantic irony.

I was in a bad state: night work, the Rotonde, the newspapers, the novels of Dostoyevsky, Léon Bloy and my own poems had turned me into a neurotic. To crown it all, a most absurd thing happened.

I caught the 'flu; I sneezed all the time and was bathed in sweat. Libion advised me to drink two or three glasses of hot grog, and did not spare the rum. I went home to fetch more handkerchiefs. Opening my wardrobe I was dumbfounded: the things inside it weren't mine.

<sup>1</sup> 'Stock Exchange Gazette', which put out a morning edition of financial news and an evening edition of popular journalism.

Perhaps I was in someone else's room? No, the watercolours lying on the table were mine (I had a craze for painting and in my odd moments depicted the life of Villon, gallows, dragons and the Rotonde). I decided to take a handkerchief all the same, but a piece of raw steak fell out of it. A fur stole slithered towards me. I rushed to the landlady and called to her that I had gone mad and was having hallucinations. The landlady, not at all surprised, said to her brother (who by this time had learnt to speak French): 'Emil, run to the police station and tell them to come at once.'

Instead of inquiring why the landlady was calling the police I went back to my room and, without turning on the light, settled down to await the end. I was shivering and everything in my mind was confused. I knew that soon they would come and take me to the lunatic asylum.

The policemen started making a list of the contents of my wardrobe. I tried asking them what it all meant but they merely grinned. Among my torn shirts there were ladies' underclothes trimmed with lace, dancing shoes, ties, bottles of scent, brandy and various foodstuffs. The drawing up of the list took a long time; they discussed the quality of the lace and the nature of the fur. Then they gave me a statement to sign and told me to report at the police station the next morning. I went to the landlady but it was late and she was already asleep. I realised that the next morning I would be put away all right, only not in a madhouse but in gaol. It is all very well to be behind bars if you have been caught carrying leaflets, but for the sake of a few rotten steaks——! Probably I was out of my mind after all: Modi had once given me some of his hashish to try, and these must be the results. I lay there semi-conscious; no doubt my temperature had gone up. The room stank of carrion. I switched on the light; there was no dead body. The stench grew worse. I decided to spend the rest of the night on the landing when suddenly I caught sight of a round camembert: the police had not noticed it and it had fallen out of the wardrobe and lay under the bed. I flung the window open although it was a cold night. So, tomorrow the end would come: gaol for theft. But perhaps they were hallucinations after all?

Early in the morning the landlady came. The first thing she said was 'How often have I asked you not to leave your key in the door?' On the same floor as myself there lived a Russian, I believe a violinist; he had a mistress, a young Frenchwoman, who had been caught

shoplifting in a department store. She had managed to warn her lover. The violinist, anxious to get rid of the stuff stolen on previous occasions and knowing that my door was always unlocked, had shoved everything into my wardrobe.

At the police station they questioned me for a long time, jeered at me and said that I must at the very least be an accomplice. The landlady came to the rescue by saying that she had seen the violinist coming out of my room. They released me and I went to the Rotonde to tell Modigliani what had happened. He smiled: 'They'll lock you up in the *Santé* soon. You want to blow up France and everyone knows it.'

A week later I was summoned to the *préfecture*. I started to explain that the fur stole and the steaks had nothing to do with me. The police official interrupted me: he did not like to be made fun of; he had no interest in steaks; but was I not in the habit of seeing gentlemen who supported the Zimmerwald conference? He wondered why a contributor to a reputable Russian newspaper wore a tattered suit and worked at a goods dépôt. Incidentally, where was Alfred Kranz at present? I did not know anyone called Kranz and asked: 'Is he an artist?' The official smirked and said: 'You're all artists.' I saw that I was in trouble. Nostradamus had failed to foresee military aviation, perhaps, but Modi was a real Nostradamus: had he not said that I should soon be arrested for subversive activity?

The interrogation lasted all the morning but ended suddenly: the official looked at his watch and said that it was time for lunch. I should be summoned again a few days later.

It was not till some time afterwards that I found out why I had been questioned at the *préfecture*. The *Birzhevka* had published one of my articles about the charitable ladies of Paris, in which I described an occasion when a Senegalese soldier had been christened at the Madeleine; the soldier kept asking his godmother nervously: 'Are you sure it doesn't hurt?' The military authorities were angry, interpreting my article as an insult to the French army. It was decided to expel me from France. Although I was an émigré, the Russian embassy was informed. The embassy counsellor Sevastopulo told the military attaché about it. The attaché, A. A. Ignatyev, was outraged; he had never heard of me, but he regarded the attitude of the French authorities as an attack on Russian prestige: the article had been passed by the Russian censorship and published in Petrograd. Press matters were outside Ignatyev's sphere of duties; he conducted negotiations with Poincaré

and Kitchener on the co-ordination of military operations and the sending of arms to Russia. Nevertheless he had the expulsion order cancelled. I heard of this a month or two later when I decided to join the Foreign Press Association. Dmitriev, the correspondent of *Rech*<sup>1</sup> and Pavlovsky (whom Chekhov had met and with whom he had corresponded), the correspondent of *Novoye Vremya*<sup>2</sup>, told me how I had nearly been expelled.

I met Alexey Alexeyevich Ignatyev at a literary gathering twelve years later. This former Tsarist diplomat, a count, had become a modest member of the Soviet trade delegation in Paris. He loved the Russian people and believed in them. The work he was given lay outside his profession—he helped to arrange Soviet stands at exhibitions. Far less competent people ordered him about. He was a man of great charm, an excellent raconteur; listening to him, Alexey Tolstoy was always astonished at his gift. When he received guests, Ignatyev used to tie a cook's apron round his waist and prepare superb French dishes in a variety of pots and pans. For almost half a century he was very happily married to Natasha Trukhanova, a former actress (under the Tsarist regime this marriage was regarded as a misalliance and the count was severely criticized for it). His wife did not survive him long. Despite his origins, despite the fact that he had grown up and had been formed in the old Russia, Ignatyev was a true democrat: he accepted the revolution, not because it gave promise of a strong Russia, but because it destroyed class and caste barriers.

In 1945 and 1946 some young Soviet officers asked Ignatyev to tell them how the officers of the Tsar's army had spent their leisure hours: it seemed to some that epaulettes were not, perhaps, the only thing the Soviet army might borrow from its predecessor. In reply, Ignatyev told them about the caste pride of the Tsarist officers, the flogging of soldiers, the coarseness and the drunkenness. I remember a captain saying with disappointment: 'Why, he talks like an agitator.' But Ignatyev was speaking of the things that mattered to him in 1916 and 1946 alike.

It is a good thing that he wrote a book of memoirs: history is full of gorges and abysses, and men have need of bridges, however, fragile, to link one epoch with another.

<sup>1</sup> 'Speech', the organ of the Kadet party (1906–1918).

<sup>2</sup> 'New Times', the leading reactionary daily.

I was not summoned to the *préfecture* again. Dmitriev advised me to go to the *Maison de la Presse*, where the military censorship had its offices and where war correspondents received the necessary documents and arrangements were made for visits to the front. At the *Maison de la Presse* I met a man who attracted my attention at once. It was O. Milosz. He had a northern face and a faintly foreign accent; he had been born in Lithuania, but wrote poetry in French. Max Jacob had told me of him. Milosz became known only after his death; he died in 1939, and a few years later his collected works were published for the first time. Occasionally I talked to Milosz, not about journalistic matters but about poetry and the future. He would gaze at me with his pale, faded-looking eyes and say, very calmly and quietly, that soon they would invent machines that would write poetry, and then some little boy of genius, still in short trousers, would hang himself with his father's tie because he would realize that he could never move anyone with words. It was strange to hear this from a man whose job was to brief me: Milosz could easily have transferred from the *Maison de la Presse* to the Rotonde.

After many applications, the French took me to the front with a group of journalists. The quietest sector was chosen for us. We were taken rapidly through some trenches and shown some guns; then we drove off to the command point, where General Gouraud entertained us to lunch. The whole thing was like a tourist trip. (Later I was to visit the front many times, and every occasion reminded me of the first.)

On the Somme, where the English were, fierce battles were in progress. I applied for a pass. The English were in no hurry to reply. At long last I was summoned to the British Military Mission and given a long statement to sign, promising that I would not publish anything without first submitting the text to the British censorship, that in the event of my being killed my heirs would address no claims to His Majesty's Government, and that I would observe British law; should I break it, I would be subject to the legislation of the British courts. I was given a British uniform and taken near Amiens where, in a comfortable house not far from G.H.Q., the war correspondents stayed: English, French, and an Italian called Barzini who was regarded as a first-rate journalist. In the evenings everyone drank whisky; the English told innocent jokes and did conjuring tricks. No one bothered about us; we were free to scrounge lifts to the front line. I saw the war.

Reading the papers in Paris I still could not imagine that the front was a grandiose machine for the planned extermination of human beings. Heroism, virtue and suffering did not decide very much: death was mechanised.

In Calais I saw the businesslike manner in which this death was prepared. Two thousand three hundred motor-car parts. Figures, everywhere figures. 'Part 617 for large tanks.' 'Handlebars 1301 for motor-cycles.' Sheep from Australia, flour from Canada, tea from Ceylon were unloaded. The latest shipment of soldiers was unloaded, too; they looked about them with a lost expression. A huge bakery baked two hundred thousand loaves a day. The soldiers ate the bread. The war devoured the soldiers.

At the front itself there was nothing: no ruined buildings, no trees, however damaged; bare grey-brown earth, regular rows of barbed wire and, in the trenches, men.

Large lorries travelled up the roads leading to the front. I saw them for the first time. They carried soldiers, shells and carcasses of meat for the trenches. In lorries going the other way there were wounded. Men with little flags regulated the traffic. I speak of this because many people now think that the First World War was still romantic.

Here is how in 1916, I described the first tank I had seen: 'There is about it something majestic and nauseating. It may be that once there existed a breed of gigantic insects; the tank is like them. It has been brightly decorated for camouflage; the flanks resemble the paintings of the Futurists. It creeps along slowly, like a caterpillar; trenches, bushes, barbed wire, nothing can stop it. Its feelers twitch: they are guns and machine-guns. In it, the archaic is combined with the ultra-American, Noah's ark with a twenty-first century bus. Inside there are men, twelve pygmies, who innocently believe that they are the tank's masters.' Less than half a century has passed, but I feel as though tanks were invented roughly at the same time as gunpowder. The diplomats who discuss disarmament have a term, 'conventional armaments', as distinct from nuclear weapons; and, of course, tanks have become conventional.

The war turned out to be much more frightening than I had thought. Everything was well ordered and calculated. Of course, in the trenches there were men; they attacked, died, writhed on hospital beds or lay spreadeagled in agony across barbed-wire entanglements. These men, for the most part good ones, sincerely believed that they

were defending their country, liberty and human values. But they were the minute parts of a gigantic machine. Soon they found out how to stop tanks: but the war moved on slowly, its feelers twitching—guns, machine-guns—and no one knew how to stop it.

I realised that I had not only been born in the nineteenth century: in 1916 I lived, thought and felt like a man from the distant past. I also realised that a new century was on its way and that it meant business.

## 25

I RETURNED to Paris. At first I thought I was happy: after the front, the boulevard Montparnasse with its café terraces, green plane trees and carefree girls seemed like paradise. I sat down at a table: there were painters, poets; they talked of how Diaghilev had commissioned Picasso to do a décor, of Paul Claudel's latest book, of this and that. And suddenly I felt bored. This was not life but a poor imitation of it. Real life was where I had come from. It was shattered by gunfire, caught in the infernal barbed wire, buried under earth, and still it was life.

I tried to disentangle my own feelings, to understand myself. Could it be that I, too, had become intoxicated by that alcohol which had gone to the heads of so many? No, I did not think so. I believed that the war was a crime, and yet my whole life was wrapped up in the war. It was all confused and incomprehensible; I gave up thinking. Despair seized me. Suddenly I began to invent a god, not the church kind but my own, now fierce, now a holy simpleton. I wrote poems on what I had described to Bryusov as 'filth'. When I think of my past today, the years 1914-19 seem to me the most difficult. I longed for the 'common idea' that Chekhov wrote of, but I did not even have a clear idea of how to live through the next day. Afterwards I came out, if not on to a road, at least into a clearing in the forest. Besides, I became less sensitive. With the years a man grows a protective shell. It is no accident that many people in their early youth write poetry and think of suicide.

The painter Chantal tried to help me. She was the daughter of a working man, had studied at a teachers' college and was passionately concerned with art. She did not know how to live either, but her feet were firmly planted on the ground. When she saw my hands drop to my sides in despair, she would talk of the smell of black-currant buds, of a fresh canvas on its stretcher, of the spring outside and of both of us being young. I said 'Yes'. Then I went home and wrote poems about the end of the world.

In the summer Katya invited me for a holiday at Eze in the South

of France where she was living with her husband Tikhon Sorokin and my daughter Irina. Tikhon had been invalided home from the front; he read Vladimir Solovyov and was depressed. I tried to be of use in the household at least, and learned how to cook spaghetti. Once Katya went to Nice and asked me to put the little girl to bed. Irina was then four years old. When I started unbuttoning her dress, she said severely: 'That's not the way. You don't know how to do anything.' She was right: I really did not know how to do anything, how to work, how to write poetry or even how to have a holiday. I went back to Paris in greater distress than ever.

Max Voloshin introduced me to B. V. Savinkov. Never before had I met so incomprehensible and frightening a man. His face was startling because of his Mongolian cheekbones and his eyes, now sad, now extremely cruel; he often closed them, and his lids were heavy, like those of Gogol's *Viy*. He took to coming to the Rotonde, where he drank marc. In contrast to the rest of us he dressed decently, like an average French bourgeois; he never took off his bowler hat. I remember a poem he wrote: 'Someone bowler-hatted, grey, son-of-a-bitching in the corner . . .'

Savinkov was a good raconteur. Anyone hearing him for the first time might have thought that he had remained an active terrorist who, tomorrow, would dress up as a cabby and hurl a bomb at a Tsarist official. In reality Savinkov no longer believed in anything. Once he told me that it was the Azef affair that broke him. Up to the very end he had believed the *agent provocateur* to be a hero. The S.R.s had been alarmed by Burtsev's revelations and had insisted on an investigation. Savinkov was indignant: he would not permit these slanders on a man of honour! At last a meeting had been called. Azef, seeing that things looked black, had stated that the documents which would disprove all charges levelled against him were at his house; he needed an hour to produce them. Everyone had protested, saying that he must not be allowed to go. Savinkov had insisted that Azef, one of the oldest members of the terrorist organisation, should be given an opportunity to prove his innocence. Azef had gone and, naturally, had never reappeared.

Savinkov threw up the sponge and turned to writing mediocre novels revealing the inner emptiness of a terrorist who has lost faith in his cause. I was always amazed that he regarded himself as a terrorist first and a revolutionary only second. During the war he became a

war correspondent for the paper *Den*<sup>1</sup>, he wrote about the need for defence and extolled Gustav Hervé. All this was uninteresting even to himself: he remained an unemployed terrorist.

(I once had a curious conversation with a Left Socialist Revolutionary, the terrorist Blumkin, who had killed Count Mirbach. At the beginning of 1921 he supported the Soviets. Savinkov was in Paris at the time and supported the intervention. Hearing that I was about to leave for Paris, Blumkin asked me whether I would be seeing Savinkov. I said no; our ways had parted. Blumkin said: 'Perhaps you'll meet him somewhere by chance. Ask him his views on the "exit from the act".' I did not understand. Blumkin explained that what interested him was whether a terrorist who had killed a political enemy ought to try to escape or pay for the assassination with his own blood. Had he met Savinkov, he would undoubtedly have killed him as an enemy; at the same time he respected him as a terrorist of great experience. For such people terrorism was not a weapon of political struggle but the world in which they lived.)

I have heard Savinkov describe how he had awaited execution in the fortress of Sebastopol. The past, for him, was bathed in the dead light of disillusionment: he said that death, like life, was a dull, everyday affair. He had been saved by a sentry who had given him his uniform greatcoat and taken his place in the condemned cell. Savinkov had left the fortress in uniform and no one had challenged him. The sentry had been hanged. Savinkov had married the sentry's sister. He was fond of Lyova, his small son, and came to life momentarily when he spoke of him. Another thing that made him brighten up was the very distant past: his childhood, the Russian landscape, the place where, as a very young man, he had been in exile with Lunacharsky and the writer Remizov.

(During the Civil War in Spain I met Lyova, Savinkov's son. He had worked in France as a lorry driver and had written poems in Russian and stories of working-class life in French. Aragon published one of his stories in *La Commune*. Lyova came to Spain to fight in the International Brigade. It became known that he was the son of 'that Savinkov' and, believing that the apple does not fall far from the tree, they began sending him through Franco's lines. Unlike his father, Lyova was a sociable and gentle person. He fulfilled every mission

<sup>1</sup> 'Day', a radical paper that at that time took a jingo line.

courageously, was very severely wounded and contracted TB. On his return to France he fell into dire poverty. When the war broke out he joined the Resistance and worked with Russians who had escaped from German camps. I met him again in Paris in 1946; he was dreaming of going to the Soviet Union. I know nothing of his subsequent fate.)

Savinkov signed both his novels and his articles on the battles of the Somme and Verdun with the pen-name V. Ropshin. In the novels he said that he no longer believed in self-sacrifice and heroic acts; in the war articles, on the contrary, he wrote of the grandeur of the soldiers' heroism and the regenerating effects of war. Once I asked him whether he believed what he wrote; he grinned and said that I was still very young. I flew into a rage: 'But then, there's nothing left but to howl like a dog!' He lowered his cast-iron eyelids: 'No, there's no need to howl. One can write another article: you've learnt how to do that by now. One can have another glass of marc, maybe two, but no more.'

Savinkov often joined the table at which Marevna used to sit (that is what everyone called Vorobyeva-Stebelskaya, the painter). She had been born in the Caucasus and had come to the Rotonde when she was scarcely more than a schoolgirl; her appearance was exotic but she had an innocent mind and insisted on truthfulness, directness and honesty. Savinkov liked her, but Marevna treated him very severely, scolded him in everyone's hearing and called him an 'old cynic'.

For me, however, Savinkov was part of the landscape of war. He was like a narrow strip of no-man's-land where there is not a single blade of grass and where, among the barbed wire, you can see broken rifles, tin hats and the remains of soldiers who had failed to reach the enemy's trenches.

I tossed aside the newspapers: why read if everyone is lying? At the Rotonde they were discussing the latest news. Dubois had lost a leg; Margot was collecting money for an artificial one. Lucie had gone out of her mind—they had found her one night, naked, on top of a railway engine. Life was going on.

Here comes Modigliani. In a moment he will say that all this was described in a book by Nostradamus, a long, long time ago.

## 26

I WAS sitting in Diego Rivera's unheated studio; we were talking of the clever way in which the authorities had learned to camouflage tanks and 'war aims' alike. Suddenly Diego shut his eyes. He seemed to be asleep. But a moment later he got to his feet and started saying something about a spider that he hated. He kept repeating that in a moment he would find the spider and crush it. He advanced towards me and I realised that the spider was myself. I ran into a corner of the studio. Diego stopped, turned and came towards me again. I had already seen Diego during fits of somnambulism; he always fought with somebody; but this time he was out to destroy me. To wake him was inhuman: it gave him an unbearable headache. I darted about the studio, not like a spider but like a fly. He always found me, although his eyes were closed. I only just managed to escape on to the landing.

Diego's skin was yellow; sometimes he would turn up the sleeve of his shirt and tell one of his friends to draw or write something on his arm with the end of a matchstick; the lines or letters stood out in relief at once. (At the Calcutta botanical gardens I have seen a tropical tree on the leaves of which you can also write with the end of a matchstick; the writing gradually stands out.) Diego told me that the sleepwalking, the yellow skin and the letters in relief were all the result of a tropical fever he had had in Mexico. I speak of this because I am thinking of Diego Rivera's life and art: he often went for his enemies with his eyes shut.

Diego liked to talk of Mexico and his childhood. He had lived in Paris for ten years and had become one of the representatives of the 'School of Paris'; he was friendly with Picasso, Modigliani and many Frenchmen. But before his eyes there always rose the rust-coloured mountains covered with jagged cacti, the peasants in broad-brimmed straw hats, the gold mines of Guanajuato, the incessant revolutions: Madero overthrowing Diaz, Huerta overthrowing Madero, the partisans of Zapata and Villa overthrowing Huerta.

As I listened to Diego I began to love his enigmatic Mexico, where ancient Aztec sculpture seemed to merge into Zapata's partisans.

Julio Jurenito is a Mexican; writing my novel I remembered Diego's tales. I have sometimes heard it said that Jurenito is a portrait of Rivera. Some details of their biographies are indeed misleadingly alike. Both my hero and Diego were born in Guanajuato; Jurenito in his early childhood sawed off the head of a live kitten in the desire to understand the difference between life and death, and Diego, wanting at the age of six to find out how babies were born, eviscerated a live rat. But, of course, Diego is quite unlike my hero. Jurenito thought more than he felt; he took the doctrine of a society he detested and carried it to absurdity in order to show how false it was. Diego was a man of the emotions and if, sometimes, he carried to absurdity the principles he cherished, it was only because the engine was powerful and there were no brakes.

I met Diego at the beginning of 1913. He was then starting to paint Cubist still-lives. Earlier canvases hung on the walls of his studio, and one could distinguish the landmarks: El Greco, Cézanne. Both his great talent and a certain excessiveness which characterised him were already in evidence. At the beginning of the century, a Spanish painter called Zuloaga had been fashionable in Paris. He became known through paintings depicting gipsies and bullfighters, in short all the things which Spaniards call *españolada*, 'Spanishry', stylised folklore. For a brief period Diego admired Zuloaga; art historians go so far as to define some Rivera canvases as the 'Zuloaga period'. By 1913 he had said goodbye to Zuloaga.

Shortly before I met him he had married Angelina Belova, a painter from Petersburg, with blue eyes, fair hair and a northern reserve. She reminded me far more of the girls I had met at political meetings in Moscow than of those who frequented the Rotonde. Angelina had a strong will and a good disposition; these helped her to bear the riotous Diego's accesses of anger and gaiety with truly angelic patience. Diego used to say: 'They made no mistake when they christened her.'

Different painters reached Cubism by different paths. For Picasso it was not a costume but his skin, even more—his body; not a manner of painting but his vision and outlook on life. I believe that not a year has passed since 1910 when, side by side with other works, Picasso has not produced several canvases which represent a continuation of his Cubist period. A manner becomes dated, but a painter cannot change his nature. For Léger, Cubism was bound up with his love

of modern architecture, the town, industrial work, the machine. Braque said that Cubism had enabled him to 'express himself more fully in painting'. In 1913 Diego Rivera was twenty-six, but I believe that he was still unable to see his own way ahead: only a year before Cubism, he had admired Zuloaga. And there, next to him, was Pablo Picasso . . . Once Diego said: 'Pablo could not only turn a devil into a saint, he could make the Lord God himself go to hell as a stoker.' Picasso never preached Cubism. He dislikes theories of art in general and becomes depressed when he is imitated. He never tried to persuade Rivera of anything but only showed him his works. Picasso did a still-life in which there was a bottle of Spanish aniseed liqueur. Soon I saw a similar bottle in Diego's work. Rivera did not realise, of course, that he was imitating Picasso; and when he did realise it, many years later, he began to revile the Rotonde: he was settling accounts with his past.

Cubism taught him many things. His works of the Paris period seem to me splendid even now. Sometimes he painted portraits: he did one of the Spanish writer Ramon Gomez de la Serna in which he conveyed the colourfulness and eccentricity of the sitter (Ramon gave a lecture on modern art in Paris while poised on the back of a circus elephant). Diego also painted Max Voloshin, the sculptor Indenbaum and the architect Azevedo. Max Voloshin's portrait conveyed a combination of a sixteen-stone man with the lightness and frivolity of a little fluttering bird; pale blue and orange tonalities; the pink mask of an aesthete from the *Apollon* and an entirely naturalistic curl from Voloshin's faun-like beard.

I, too, sat for Rivera. He allowed me to read or write, but asked me to keep my hat on. The portrait is a Cubist one, yet it is a very good likeness (it was bought by an American diplomat; Rivera knew nothing about the subsequent fate of this canvas). I have kept a lithograph of the portrait. In 1916 Diego did the illustrations for two of my books; one was printed by the same never-say-die Rirakhovsky, the other we did by the lithographic method, I writing and Diego drawing. He liked doing still-lives best.

Rivera was the first American I had met; I did not know Pablo Neruda until much later, during the Spanish War. The two have something in common: both were reared on the art of old Europe, both wanted to create their own national art and endowed it with certain features of the New World: force, colourfulness, an absence of

any sense of moderation (ordinary rain in America is like a deluge). Together with Orozco, Diego created the Mexican school of painting. His frescoes reveal the peculiarities of his own character as well as of the character of America: elemental force, technological wealth and a kind of naïvety.

We became friends: we were the extreme wing of the Rotonde because we knew that, as well as ancient, melancholy and calculating Paris, there existed other worlds and phenomena of other proportions. Diego told me about Mexico, I told him about Russia. Although he said he had read Marx before the war, what he admired were the Zapatistas; the childish anarchism of Mexican shepherds appealed to him. As for me, everything in my mind was a jumble at that time: Bolshevik meetings and Mitya Karamazov at Mokroye, the novels of Léon Bloy, that belated Savonarola, and Picasso's eviscerated violins, hatred of the well-oiled bourgeois life of France and love of the French national character, faith in the special mission of Russia and a longing for disaster. Diego and I understood each other well. The whole Rotonde was a world of exiles, but he and I were, I believe, exiles among the exiles.

Rivera often met Savinkov. His natural love of life served as an insurance against cynicism, and the idea of this decently dressed gentleman in a bowler hat stalking Grand Dukes and Ministers fascinated him. I remember one evening at the very beginning of 1917. Rivera was sitting at the Rotonde with Savinkov and Max, I with Modigliani and Margot the model; Lapinski and Léger were having an animated discussion at other tables nearby. When the café closed at ten o'clock, Modi persuaded us all to go back to his place.

For some reason I have a clear memory of our long, disjointed discussion about the war, the future and art. Let me try to summarize it; it may be that some sentences were spoken on other occasions, but the thoughts of each of us were as I give them here now.

LÉGER. The war will soon be over. The soldiers don't want to go on fighting. The Germans, too, will realise that it's senseless. Germans always think more slowly, but they are bound to realise it. It will be necessary to rebuild the devastated areas and countries. I think the politicians will be driven out: they are bankrupt. Engineers, technicians, perhaps workers, too, will replace them. Of course Renoir is a good artist, but it is difficult to believe that he is living in

our day. Tanks and Renoir? Where should the inspiration come from? Science, technology, labour. Sport, too.

VOLOSHIN. I don't believe that's enough for people. Can Europe be transformed into America? The war has ploughed up not only Picardy but the very heart of man. Hobbes called the State 'the Leviathan'. Men can become automatic tigers: they've had experience of it and they've acquired the taste. I prefer Léger's canvases to machines. Being the slave of inanimate creatures doesn't appeal to me.

MODIGLIANI. You're all a lot of bloody innocents. Do you think anyone's going to say to you: 'My dear fellows, take your choice'? You make me laugh. The only people who make a choice today are the ones with self-inflicted wounds, and they get shot for it. When the war is over everyone will be put in prison. Nostradamus was right. Everyone will have to put on convicts' uniform. At the very most, the academicians will be entitled to wear checked trousers instead of striped ones.

LÉGER. No. People have changed. They are waking up.

LAPINSKI. That's true. Of course, capitalism cannot create anything any more, it can only destroy. But consciousness is growing. Perhaps we're on the eve of decision. No one knows where it will start: in Paris, in the trenches or in Petersburg.

SAVINKOV. 'Consciousness' is a myth. In Germany there were a lot of Socialists, but when they heard '*eins, zwei*' they started marching pretty fast. The worst is still ahead.

LAPINSKI. No, the worst lies behind us. The Socialists can . . .

MODIGLIANI. Do you know what the Socialists are like? Bald-headed parrots. I said so to my brother. Please don't take offence: the Socialists are better than the rest all the same. But you don't understand anything. Thomas a Minister! What's the difference between Mussolini and Cadorna? Rubbish! Soutine has painted a marvellous portrait. There's a Rembrandt, believe it or not. But he'll be put behind bars like everyone else. Listen (*this was to Léger*), you want to organise the world. But the world can't be measured with a ruler. There are people . . .

LÉGER. There were good painters in the past, too. We need a new approach. Art will survive if it finds the language of the modern world.

RIVERA. No one in Paris needs art. Paris is dying. Art is dying.

Zapata's peasants never saw a machine in their lives, but they are a hundred times more modern than Poincaré. I am sure that if we were to show them our art, they would understand it. Who built the Gothic cathedrals and the Aztec temples? Everybody. And for everybody. Ilya, you're a pessimist because you're too civilised. Art needs to swallow a mouthful of barbarity. Negro sculpture saved Picasso. Soon you'll all go to the Congo or to Peru. A school of savagery is what is wanted.

MYSELF. There's enough savagery where we are. I don't care for exoticism. Who'll go to the Congo? The Zetlins, perhaps Max, to write another cycle of sonnets. I detest machines. What's wanted is goodness. When I see posters advertising Cadum soap, I know that the baby surrounded by soap bubbles is pure and good. How terrible that Hindenburg and Poincaré were babies too.

RIVERA. You're a European, and that is your misfortune. Europe is at its last gasp. The Americans will come, the Asians and the Africans

...

SAVINKOV. The Americans will soon declare war and land. What Asians do you mean? The Japanese?

RIVERA. For all I know.

Suddenly Rivera closed his eyes. Only Modigliani and I realized what that meant. Lapinski was quietly talking to Léger. Max, not noticing what was happening to Rivera, went on telling him about the visions of Julia Krudener. Modi and I edged our way towards the door. Diego rose to his feet and cried: 'Good day, *messieurs les croquemorts*! You've come for me, I think? Don't you believe it! I'm going to do the burying.' He turned to Max and picked him up; this was incredible—Max weighed at least sixteen stone. Diego kept repeating ominously: 'Straight away. Head foremost. I'll give you a first-class funeral.'

In 1917 Rivera suddenly became infatuated with Marevna, whom he had known for a long time. Their characters were well matched—hot-tempered, sensitive and childish. Two years later Marevna had a daughter, Marika. (Recently I saw Marevna in London. She is drawing, modelling, writing her memoirs. Marika is very like Diego; she is an actress; her looks are Mexican, her native tongue French, she has been married to an Englishman and is fond of saying that she is half Russian.)

When I came back to Paris in the spring of 1921 I naturally looked

up Rivera at once. He was still living in the same studio. In the meantime he had been to Italy, where he had admired the frescoes of Giotto and Uccello. He was doing a lot of drawing; those were the first sketches of his new period. He was enthusiastic about the October Revolution and what he had heard of 'Proletkult'. He was planning to return to Mexico.

Soon afterwards he began covering the walls of government buildings in his own country with grandiose frescoes. I read about him and sometimes saw reproductions of the frescoes, but never met him. In 1928 he went to Moscow; we failed to meet, as he had by-passed Paris. One day one of his former wives, the beautiful Mexican Guadalupe Marin, came to see me; she was trying to find early works of Diego's in Paris.

Rivera became famous. Scholars wrote monographs on him. He was invited to the United States, where he painted the portrait of one of the automobile kings, Edsell Ford. Rockefeller commissioned him to do some frescoes. Rivera depicted scenes of social struggle including Lenin. After long negotiations the frescoes were destroyed.

In Stockholm in 1951 I visited a large exhibition of Mexican art. The ancient Aztec sculpture impressed me deeply; it reminded me of the ancient sculptures of India and China. The paths of civilisation astounded me: from archaism and monumentality, the Aztecs had passed at once to the refinements of baroque. Then I went up to the second floor and saw Rivera's works. The easel paintings showed pictorial power. There were also reproductions of mural paintings. They roused no feeling in me, probably because I did not understand them. The portals of Gothic cathedrals are the encyclopedia of the epoch in stone, but that was when people could not read. Rivera's frescoes are a multitude of stories about the history of the Mexican revolution, inoculations against smallpox, the economics of the New World. He has not forgotten the lessons of Italy, and his Mexican women bend, dance and sleep like Florentine ladies of the fifteenth century. He wanted to combine national traditions with modern art; many Indian and Japanese artists have tried to do the same. Suddenly I understood the reproaches he had addressed to Soviet artists: why did they neglect 'folk art', 'lacquered boxes'? Had he been a Russian, he would probably have tried to combine the early Rivera with Palekh art.

However, I am beginning to speak of my tastes in art, which is

out of place. It would be better to say that Rivera attempted to solve one of the most difficult problems of our age, that of creating mural art. He maintained his loyalty to the people throughout his life; he quarrelled with the Mexican Communists many times and made it up again, but from 1917 to the day of his death he regarded Lenin as his teacher.

He came to Vienna for the Peace Congress. That was in 1952. I told him that at the Mexican exhibition I had liked the works of Tamayo. Diego was angry and accused me of formalism; instead of a meeting between friends after thirty years' separation, there was a boring disputation on easel and mural painting. Later he visited Moscow for medical treatment and came to see me. We spent the evening in reminiscences; we talked as people talk when the luggage is packed and one sits down for a while before a long voyage. Everything in him that was childlike, direct, heartfelt, everything that had once moved me, came to the surface that evening. We never met again.

He was one of those people who do not just enter a room but somehow fill it at once. Our age has put heavy pressure on many people, but Rivera never yielded, and it was the age that was forced to make room.

## 27

I SENT letters brimming with indignation to the *Birzhevka*: why did my front-line sketches appear in a garbled form? The letters had no effect. I went on writing sketches and gradually accepted the fact that my articles were smoothed out and even that other people's thoughts were sometimes ascribed to me. It was the third year of the war and everyone had become accustomed to it: that was the most frightening part.

At Albert, a small town in Picardy, an innkeeper's wife with four children lived in a half-ruined house. She no longer paid attention to the shells and complained only of the rising price of wine: 160 francs the hectolitre. She did brisk business, for soldiers drank wine despite the high price. Her children believed that people had always lived under bombardment.

Near an English gun emplacement there was a flour mill. It was, of course, not working, but the old miller had stayed on in his little house. The Germans shelled the battery, but the old man had only one thought in his head: he was afraid that the soldiers would steal the flour sacks or make them dirty.

Normal life went on in the cellars of Rheims: the paper *Bulletin de l'Est* was printed in one cellar, school classes were held in another, a barber worked in a third.

Before the war, every small French town had its town crier, a municipal employee who went round the streets with a drum calling out announcements: so-and-so had lost a dog, so-and-so his briefcase. There were no wireless sets yet and the French heard the news of the mobilisation from these 'heralds'. At Compiègne I saw an old man with a drum; shells were falling, but he shouted hoarsely that a lady had lost a brooch and the finder would be rewarded.

Life in the trenches was a life of the damned and yet an everyday life; men waited for letters, killed lice, cursed the officers and swapped dirty stories. Then they died.

The English soldiers shaved unfailingly every day: death is all very well, but a man must shave.

Guillaume Apollinaire was in love, writing letters and poems to Lou (Louise de Coligny-Châtillon). Lou, a society lady, rejected him. He lived with the war: 'There are thousands of pine trees broken by shells; there are soldiers who, at night, saw up boards for coffins. Five kilometres from here there is a cemetery solid with crosses.' There was a delivery of mail to his trench. Apollinaire opened the latest issue of the *Mercur de France* containing an article by him, and at that moment a piece of shrapnel wounded him severely in the head.

Once, near Lens, I asked a French soldier pottering about near a little house that seemed to have been preserved by a miracle whether it was safe to go on: were the Germans shelling the road? He said he did not know. He was not at the front at all, but spending six days' leave with his wife, who lived in the little house.

In one village the zouaves found a woman of well over forty. They shouted enthusiastically. A queue formed outside the little house. The military command opened brothels for the men. At the Mailly camp there were 'French days' and 'Belgian days'.

The winter was exceptionally cold. The Seine froze over. There was no coal and everyone shivered. The government insisted on economies: it was decided to do without pastries two days a week; at the expensive restaurants you could order hors-d'oeuvres, soup and fish, but to follow, only one meat dish, steak or duck: too bad, but it was the third year of the war. As always, ladies' tailors dictated new fashions: short skirts, small hats resembling soldiers' forage caps, suits of a pale blue 'protective' colour. The papers printed advertisements for perfumes, sleeping pills, and artificial limbs for the mutilated. They wrote that asceticism did not become the French: it was a sign of weakness, and France was confident of victory. The cinemas were overcrowded. A fresh instalment of the *Mysteries of New York* was shown every week.

Once at a small cinema Rivera and I saw a film actor I had never seen before. He smashed crockery and daubed elegant ladies with paint. We guffawed like everyone else, but when we had left the cinema I said to Diego that I felt afraid: the funny little man in the bowler hat exposed the whole absurdity of life. Diego replied: 'Yes, he's a tragedian.' We told Picasso to be sure to see the film with Charlot: that was the name the French gave Charlie Chaplin, as yet entirely unknown.

The painters at the Rotonde went on talking about Cubism. A

bad-tempered captain at army headquarters sat over a pile of photographs. For the first time I saw the earth photographed from the air: it was very like drawings by Metzinger and Gleizes. (Arriving by air at Wroclaw in 1948, Picasso said to me, laughing: 'The world from above looks like some of my canvases'.)

In YMCA huts on the British front one could get sandwiches; on Sunday mornings there were church services, and film shows in the evenings. Instructive posters on the walls spoke of the love of God, the advantages of sobriety and the necessity of avoiding venereal disease.

Everyone became superstitious; few people risked being the third to light a cigarette with the same match. Charitable ladies wasted no time and pressed medallions representing Our Lady of Lourdes into the hands of soldiers departing for the front. The soldiers accepted the medallions: who knows?

(A Senegalese soldier gave me a talisman which, he said, was much better than any medallion. It consisted of teeth, whether a Frenchman's or a German's, I do not know.)

N.C.O.s punished the Senegalese before they had done anything wrong, to instil respect. The 'Blacks' were sent out to their certain death. They coughed and fell ill, not understanding where they were or why they were being killed. The Indo-Chinese, small enigmatic men imported for work at war factories, maintained a dark silence. In those years the bill which, much later, was to be presented for payment was being written in blood.

1916 was, I believe, the year that saw the greatest bloodshed: the Somme, Verdun. Women with tear-stained faces could be seen at every step in Paris. The soldiers stood fast until death. Just before the Second World War I read Poincaré's diaries. Here are some entries made during the days of the battle of Verdun: 'Clemenceau, doubtless considering that there is now little chance of a Cabinet crisis, is concentrating his attacks on myself . . . Bourgeois thinks that Briand has tilted the balance too far in favour of Joffre's opponents . . . Noulens acted aggressively and played into the hands of the Radicals against Thomas . . . Briand in his reply spared Clemenceau . . .'

Foreign correspondents, on the look-out for sensational news, tried to chum up with Gallieni's batman, Joffre's driver and Briand's chambermaid. In their spare time they flirted with Frenchwomen, bribing them with American candy. Everyone cursed the censorship. Barzini was radiant: he had got permission to attend a military execu-

tion. Irritated yet admiring, he said: 'The swine was extraordinarily calm.' I went to the *Maison de la Presse*. Milosz explained to me absently that the offensive had been halted by bad weather; no doubt he was thinking that humanity was doomed.

Also at the *Maison de la Presse* I received hand-outs which invariably spoke of 'increasing resources'. The number of men was growing smaller, that of guns and planes larger. Massed tank attacks began. The Socialist deputy Bracke told me that a parliamentary commission was investigating a scandal connected with the supply of munitions. Never had people grown rich so quickly as in those days. It was then that I first started thinking about *Julio Jurenito*: it would be a good idea to tell the story of a vast business dealing in the extermination of people. In the novel I called it 'Mr Cool's economic empire'.

(In my book, Julio Jurenito invents a method for the wholesale destruction of mankind. I describe the invention itself in a rather muddled fashion, admitting that 'by reason of my innate stupidity in all things connected with physics and mathematics, I didn't take any of it in'. Jurenito offers the mass-destruction weapon to Mr Cool, but the latter replies: 'I beg of you, my dear fellow, do not tell anyone about your invention for the time being. If killing becomes so simple and easy, the war will end in a couple of weeks and my economic empire will collapse. My own country is only just getting ready to fight.'

Later I write that Mr Cool explained to me: 'The Germans can be finished off with French bayonets, whilst Jurenito's magic would be better left for the Japanese.' I am often asked by Japanese people why, in 1921, when Japan was America's ally, I had written that the Americans would test their new deadly weapon on the Japanese. I do not know what to say. Why did Andrey Bely write in 1919, long before the discoveries of Rutherford, Joliot-Curie and Fermi, 'The world, an unincarnated hecatomb, in Curie's experiments was being torn apart into electronic currents by an exploding atomic bomb'? Perhaps such prophetic lapses are bound up with the writer's work.)

I have said that the First World War was a rough draft; but no one would compare it to the lisping of a child. Gas attacks were continuing (Léger was one of the victims). Wounded men with faces mutilated by flame-throwers were not allowed out of hospital: the effect on people in the street was too appalling. Here is something I wrote in 1916:

'In Picardy the Germans have retreated forty or fifty kilometres. Everywhere you see the same thing: towns, villages, even scattered cottages utterly burnt out. This is not an atrocity committed by soldiers: it appears that an order was issued, and sappers on bicycles covered the whole evacuation zone. It is a desert. The towns of Bapaume, Ham, Chauny, Nesles have been burnt down. They say the German command decided to ruin the economy of France for a long time ahead. Picardy is famous for its pears and plums. Everywhere the orchards have been cut down. At Chauny I was pleased at first to see some espalier pear-trees still standing. I went closer and saw that all the trees were sawn across at the base. There were more than two hundred of them. The French soldiers swore; one of them had tears in his eyes.'

Only one detail gives away the period: sappers on bicycles.

(In the autumn of 1944, at Glukhovo which had just been liberated by our army, I saw an orchard with apple trees neatly sawn across near the base; the leaves were still green and there was fruit on the branches. Our soldiers swore, like the French at Chauny.)

This is not a writer's tale, not an article on German militarism, but merely two days out of one man's life.

At the beginning of the war German soldiers burned down the small town of Gerbéviller, near Nancy, which they occupied for a short time. When I went there the inhabitants were sheltering in huts and dugouts. They said that out of five hundred houses only twenty were left; a hundred people had been shot. Why? Nobody knew. Why, on entering Senlis and Amiens, had the soldiers set about killing the inhabitants? In 1916 I saw German posters announcing the execution of hostages: such posters reappeared on the walls of French towns a quarter of a century later.

They say that Hitler invented many things; but no, he merely assimilated them and put them into practice on a grandiose scale. In one of my articles I quoted an order issued by the German *Kommandantur* at the village of Aulnes near St Quentin: the entire population of fifteen villages in the district (including children over the age of fifteen) must turn out for harvest work from 4 a.m. until 8 p.m. The *Kommandantur* warned that 'men, women and children who fail to report for work will be punished by twenty strokes of the rod'.

In 1910 I had gone from quiet Bruges to quiet Ypres, where there was a medieval Cloth Hall decorated with wonderful statues, one of

the few remaining monuments of secular Gothic. I went back to Ypres in 1916; it was under German artillery fire. Instead of the Cloth Hall I saw ruins. Only one stone woman, left untouched by chance, continued to smile. The inhabitants had been evacuated long ago and the soldiers lived in cellars and dugouts. In front of the ruined Cloth Hall I saw two English soldiers; they were talking about Gothic art and one of them was writing something in a notebook.

The word 'Yprite' appeared: it was the name for the poison gas which the Germans used in the battle of Ypres for the first time.

In 1921 I visited the ruins of Ypres once more. The inhabitants had returned and were occupying the dugouts. Enterprising businessmen had put up shacks with signs like 'Hôtel de la Victoire', 'Restaurant de la Paix', 'Café des Alliés'. Thousands of tourists came to stare at the ruins. Disabled men, legless or blind, sold picture postcards with views of the ravaged town.

Then Ypres was rebuilt and a new war began.

For two years the artillery bombarded Arras, one of the oldest towns of France. On the tower of the town hall there was a golden lion, the keeper of the town's liberties. The tower fell; French soldiers picked up the lion and sent it to Paris. Later Arras was rebuilt, and shortly afterwards the first bomb of the Second World War fell on the town. It reminds me of the myth of Sisyphus in hell, or the Russian story of the little white bull.

Second-Lieutenant Jean-Richard Bloch wrote to his wife 'this war must be the last'. In his letters he was always asking his wife for news of their children; the youngest daughter, Françoise, was three years old. In 1945 the Germans executed Françoise ('France') in Hamburg.

In the year 1916 which I am describing now, not a single soldier could imagine how he could live through yet another day; but the war seemed to everyone to be there for all eternity. The young Ernest Hemingway was sitting in a trench on the Italian front; we know what was in his heart from *A Farewell to Arms*. Máté Zalka sat in an Austro-Hungarian trench opposite. In 1937, Hemingway and General Lukács (that was Máté Zalka's name in Spain) met at the command post of the 12th International Brigade near Madrid. 'War is always filthy,' General Lukács kept saying good-naturedly as he looked at a map. Hemingway was asking him about the fighting for the Palacio Ibarra.

The proprietor of my hotel came home on leave. We embraced. He

told me that the soldiers were weary to death, that they hated the politicians and the speculators, that they did not believe the newspapers. 'But what can you do,' he repeated, 'there's two hundred metres between us and the boches. Of course their soldiers are just as badly off, but those are the generals' orders. I've seen what they did to Peronne.'

I read the papers which Lapinski lent me. They said that only the capitalists were interested in the continuation of the war. I knew that even without the papers: there was too much lying, hypocrisy and cruelty everywhere. I remember a cartoon in the respectable *Illustration*: a fat man in a bowler hat weeping at the word 'peace' and saying: 'I supply four thousand artillery shells a day, you're trying to ruin me.' Yes, in 1916 everyone knew this. But behind it all there stood, not only the fat men in bowler hats, but also France with her quiet towns and wistaria-covered walls. And the Germans were at Noyon. No one knew what was to be done.

Every year people who lived through the First World War die. A generation which has not even known the Second is entering life. We—I am speaking of my contemporaries—are coming to the end of our lives but we can forget nothing. During the last eleven years I have given almost all my strength, all my time to one thing: the struggle for peace. I am writing this book between journeys, often putting aside an unfinished chapter. My friends sometimes tell me that what I am doing is foolish; I could well sit still for a while and write another novel. But there are plenty of novels in the world. I remember the year 1916, our impotence and despair. If only one can do something, however small, to help to defend peace! I turn Descartes' words the other way round: one may think differently about the purpose and meaning of life, but in order to think it is necessary to exist. I look out of the window and see a small boy. His face is too serious. He is dressed in enormous felt boots. He is modelling something with the last of the April snow although it is already turning grey. This Descartes is only eight years old but he is thinking something. Surely he will think them to the end, those thoughts which we never had time to think out properly? Just so long as he is not killed . . .

## 28

I ASK myself why it is difficult for me to write of Picasso. Is it because he is very famous, because hundreds of books have been written about him, because there exist volumes devoted not only to each of his works but also to his studios, his pigeons and his dogs, his caps and his sweaters? Yes, of course, many people have described Picasso—his closest friends as well as people who have met him only casually; they have described him intelligently or stupidly, colourlessly or with talent. But that is not why I find it hard to write about him: how many times have I, like any other writer, sat down at my desk knowing full well that I am about to describe what has been described long ago? Everyone will agree that it is far more difficult to write about ordinary autumn rain than the take-off of a jet aircraft; but in this book I often try to speak of subjects that have been described many times before, and described much better. The difficulty lies elsewhere: in Picasso himself.

An important painter once said to me: 'Picasso is a genius but he does not love life, and art is an assertion of life.' That is true, as it is also true that Picasso has a passionate love of people, nature and art, and that he has never lost an adolescent's curiosity; many of his canvases speak not only of the beauty of life but of its warmth, taste and smell. Those who write about Picasso make the point that he sets out to flay and gut the visible world, to dismember both nature and morality, to disrupt that which exists; some see in this his strength and revolutionary quality, others speak with regret or indignation of his 'spirit of destruction'. (At the end of the forties, reading the opinions of some of our critics on Picasso, I thought it curious that their verdict—not, of course, by any choice of theirs—coincided with that of Churchill and Truman, who, being respectively an amateur painter and an amateur musician, condemned the rebel Picasso.) I have felt Picasso's destructive power many times in my life. There have been periods when I felt nothing but that power, rejoiced in it and drew inspiration from it. But that is something that belongs to my biography, not Picasso's. (Today some of Picasso's paintings seem to be unbearable; I

cannot understand how he can conceive a hatred for a lovely woman's face.) Is it fair to call 'destructive' a man filled with the desire for creation, an artist who, for more than sixty years on end, has done nothing but build and is still building, who joined the Communists instead of choosing anarchism, indifference or the pose of scepticism that comes so much more easily to an artist? One may—and this, too, would be the truth—say that Picasso comes to life only in his studio, that he is irritated by the aesthetic illiteracy of various 'judges', that he prefers solitude to public activity. But, when this has been said, how can one ignore his passionate involvement during the years of the Spanish War, his peace doves, his participation in the peace movement, his party card, his posters, his drawings for *L'Humanité* and many other things?

During the Montmartre period (Bateau-Lavoir), which was over before I came to Paris, and during the period of the Rotonde which I have attempted to describe, we were all young and we liked to shock. But Picasso has retained his love of jokes, of 'having people on', until his eightieth year. To this day he still poses naked for photographers, makes fools of illustrious visitors, takes part in bullfights. There is a large series of lithographs called *The Painter and his Model*. The painter sometimes resembles Rubens, sometimes Matisse in his old age; the models are nude professional sitters or personages out of Velasquez and other old masters; among them there is often a young jester and this jester is like Picasso (he laughs at himself, and, surely, is proud of himself). No one, listening to him, knows exactly where joking ends; he knows how to make fun with a very serious air indeed, but he says serious things in such a way that, if one chooses, one can easily take them for a joke.

I am sometimes asked what is the correct way to pronounce Picasso's name: with the accent on the last syllable or the penultimate one; in other words, is he a Spaniard or a Frenchman? Of course he is a Spaniard, by his looks and his character, the cruelty of his realism, his passion, his profound and dangerous irony. The Civil War in Spain had a tremendous effect on him; it may be that *Guernica* will remain the most significant painting of our times. At Picasso's studio in the rue Saint-Augustin I have always met Spanish refugees. He never refuses a Spaniard anything. All this is true, but one must remember another thing as well. Why had he voluntarily spent his whole life in France? Why has he always, and to this day, looked upon Cézanne as great?

Why were his best friends three French poets: Guillaume Apollinaire, Max Jacob and Paul Eluard? No, you cannot divorce Picasso from France.

Some people undergo abrupt changes, and these changes help to tell their story: lives take on elements of that 'plot development' which is so tempting to novice playwrights. Carried away by a man's unexpected actions, biographers often tend to forget his essential character. The same thing happens with those who do research into the works of poets and painters: Mayakovsky's Futurist period, Blok's Nekrasov period, Manet's Spanish period, Cézanne's Impressionist period. In the same way people also try to dissect Picasso's work. One might think that nothing could be easier: every two or three years he has astounded, and still astounds, the critics with new pictorial discoveries. The experts distinguish many periods: the Blue, the Pink, the Negro period, the Cubist period, the Ingres period, the Classical period and so forth. The trouble is that Picasso has a way of suddenly defying all classifications. After visiting Picasso's studio in 1922, Mayakovsky reassured his friends: the rumours were false, Picasso had not gone back to classicism. The young Mayakovsky was, however, surprised not to find any 'period' whatever in Picasso's work. 'His studio is full of the most widely varying things, starting with a highly realistic scene in pale blue and pink, altogether in the antique style, and ending with a construction of tin and wire. Look at his illustrations: this little girl is right out of Serov. A crudely realistic portrait of a woman and an old, disintegrated violin. And all these things bear the same date.' Mayakovsky thought that a poet writing poems in the shape of a ladder could not feel enthusiasm for sonnets at the same time. But Picasso is indifferent to all aesthetic concepts. I have never met a man who changes so quickly and is yet so constant, so true to himself. When I visited him the last time, at Cannes in 1958, I repeatedly caught myself thinking: what witchcraft is this? The whole world has changed out of recognition, and here's Picasso still exactly the same as he was forty-five years ago. But, as I thought this, I also knew that no one had progressed more rapidly than he.

That is why it is so difficult to speak of Picasso: whatever one says is both true and false. The form of words by which witnesses are sworn in a court of law is similar in all countries. They are told to speak 'nothing but the truth' and also—sometimes this is an impossible task—'the whole truth'. Of course, if the question is simply whether the

accused has or has not committed the crime in question, it is not difficult for the witness to tell the whole truth. But when the prosecution or the defence tries to establish why the accused came to be in the dock, they are asking too much of the witness: after all, he is not a Shakespeare, a Stendhal or a Tolstoy. Some authors have said that Picasso's life and work are full of contradictions. That is an evasion. If you write a guidebook on Holland, you can easily describe the climate and landscape of that country: flat, green fields, canals, cool summers with frequent rain, mild winters. But if you are asked about the climate and the landscape of the Soviet Union you will not answer in a few sentences. Can one write off as 'contradictions' the mountains of the Caucasus and the tundra, Crimean peaches and the cloudberryes of the north? There are such things as big countries. There is also such a thing as a big man. To those who are accustomed to a normal scale, complexity always appears to be full of contradictions.

As soon as I met Picasso I realized, or rather sensed at once that I was in the presence of a great man. It was shortly before the beginning of the war, in the early spring of 1914. I was at the Rotonde with Max Jacob; Picasso came in and sat down at our table. Max Jacob began telling him about me. Picasso was silent; then he said that he liked poets and liked Russians. I could not tell whether he was speaking seriously or whether his words were an ironic formula of politeness. (I have already mentioned the fact that Picasso's best friends were poets; as for Russians, he really does like them; he has often told me that Russians are like Spaniards.) That spring there was an auction sale of pictures by new artists, and a large canvas of Picasso's was sold for an enormous sum: if memory does not betray me, it fetched ten thousand francs. Picasso was becoming known.

(Long before then a few art lovers, including the Moscow collector Shchukin, had 'discovered' Picasso. Picasso and Matisse have both told me how Shchukin, on entering a studio, immediately picked out the best works. Matisse tried to palm off his less successful pictures, saying of those from which he did not want to part: 'This one hasn't come off . . . it's a daub.' The trick always failed and Shchukin would finally buy the 'daub' that hadn't 'come off'. He would soon be followed at the studio by Morozov, who trusted his rival's taste but preferred to leave the choice of picture to the painters themselves. Thanks to the collections of these two Muscovites, the Hermitage and the Pushkin Museum possess extraordinary collections of French art of the late nineteenth

and early twentieth century. There were admirers of Picasso in other countries as well. In 1950 the Czech poet Nezval took me to a suburb of Prague where Kramář, by then a retired old man, was living. At Kramář's house I saw some superb Picassos dating from the early Cubist period. Kramář told me that he came to Paris to see Picasso as a young man with a very limited amount of money. Picasso at that time was relatively little known and sold him ten pictures for a small price. Kramář had the greatest admiration for the young artist; when he bought a still-life with apples which Picasso had just painted, he asked to be given one of the apples which had served as a model. He showed me this apple, mummified. We wrote a letter to Picasso together.)

At the beginning of 1915, on a cold winter's day, Picasso took me to his studio which was in the rue Schoelcher, not far from the Rotonde. Its windows faced the Montparnasse cemetery. Paris cemeteries lack the poetic quality of Russian and English churchyards; they are abstract towns with straight roads, tombs and gravestones. In the studio there wasn't room to swing a cat; finished canvases, pieces of cardboard, tinplate, wire and wood lay scattered all over the place. One corner was piled high with tubes of paint. I had never seen so many tubes, not even at a colour merchant's. Picasso explained that in the past he had often lacked money for paints; after selling a few canvases a short time ago, he had decided to stock up 'for the rest of his life'. I saw painting on the walls, on the seat of a broken stool, on cigar-boxes; Picasso confessed that there were times when he could not bear a blank surface. He worked in a sort of unimaginable frenzy. With other artists, months of creative work alternate with those blank periods when the poet or painter, in Pushkin's words, 'tastes cool sleep'. But Picasso has spent all his life working and still continues to work with the same fury. The eccentricities so dear to reporters and photographers are not Picasso's life but only moments of relaxation.

I asked him why he kept the tinplate; he said he wanted to use it, but did not yet know how. I think there is no material in which he has not worked. All his life he has learnt new things: he loves skill. At forty he learned from Julio Gonzalez, a Spanish artisan, how to work sheet iron; at sixty he learnt the lithographer's art; at seventy he became a potter.

In the studio there were pieces of Negro sculpture and a large painting by the Douanier Rousseau, the amateur painter whose works today

grace the walls of museums all over the world. The painting represented a peace conference. Picasso explained to me that Negro sculptors altered the proportions of the head, the body and the arms not at all because they could not see straight, nor because they did not know how to sculpt: they had a different conception of proportion, just as Japanese artists had a different conception of perspective. 'Do you think the Douanier Rousseau had never looked at classical art? He often went to the Louvre. But he wanted to work in a different way.' Picasso was the first to realise that our epoch demands directness, immediacy and power.

He was then thirty-four, but he looked younger, with very lively, piercing and incredibly dark eyes, black hair and small, almost feminine hands. Often, sitting in the Rotonde, he would be gloomy, saying almost nothing; sometimes, in an access of gaiety, he would joke and tease his friends. He exuded unrest, and this had a reassuring effect on me: watching him I understood that what was happening to me was not a special case, not a private disease, but a characteristic of the age. I have already said that there were times when the thing I cherished in Picasso was his destructive force: that is how I first knew him and came to love him in the years of the First World War.

It is usually said that during that period Picasso was indifferent to everything known as 'politics'. If the term is taken to mean ministerial changes or newspaper polemics, it is true that what Picasso looked for in *Le Matin* were peculiar incidents rather than declarations. But I remember how he rejoiced at the news of the February Revolution. At that time he gave me a painting. We were not to meet again for many years.

They say that friendship, like love, demands the presence of its object; after long separation it fades. Sometimes I did not see Picasso for as long as eight or ten years but at the end of that time it was never a stranger, a changed man whom I met. (That is why I cannot remember precisely when he told me this or that particular thing—it might have been in 1914 or in 1954.) I remember various studios: in a smart bourgeois flat in the rue de La Boétie, where he stayed as a chance visitor, almost as a burglar; a very old house in the rue Saint-Augustin where the studio was huge, with Spaniards, pigeons, enormous canvases and that systematic and organised disorder which Picasso engenders everywhere; the sheds in Vallauris, scraps of iron, clay, drawings, glass balls, bits of posters, cast-iron pillars and the little hut

where he slept, his bed buried under newspapers, letters and photographs; the large, bright house called *Californie* at Cannes where there were children, dogs and, again, piles of letters, telegrams, vast canvases and, in the garden, Picasso's bronze goat.

Long ago, jokingly, I called him a devil—*chyort*. Frenchmen find this Russian word difficult to pronounce, but in Spanish the sound 'ch' exists and, smiling, Pablo says 'I'm a *chyort*'.

If he is a devil, then it is a very special devil who has quarrelled with God about the creation of the world, who has rebelled and has not yielded. Usually the devil is not only cunning but malevolent. But Picasso is a good devil.

How simple-minded, ignorant or ill-intentioned are the people who regard his great and difficult artistic path as a series of deliberate eccentricities, a desire to '*épater le bourgeois*', a love of fashionable 'isms'! He has often said to me that it made him laugh to read that he was 'seeking new forms'. 'I seek only one thing: to express that which I want to express. I do not seek new forms, I find them.' Once he told me that when he starts work he sometimes does not know whether the painting will be a Cubist one or extremely realistic: this is dictated both by the model and by the artist's frame of mind.

A beautiful young American woman posed for Picasso at Vallauris. He did dozens of drawings of her and painted several portraits in oils. In the first portrait, the American looks as she appeared to other people round her; no champion of realism in the narrowest sense of the word could find any fault with this picture. Gradually Picasso began to break up her face. More of the model than her angelic features revealed itself to him; he found characteristics which disclosed her personality and began to study them. 'Why, this is a Cubist pig,' was a witticism I heard from a gallery visitor gazing at the American girl's tenth portrait, all unaware that the first portrait of the 'Cubist pig' was the beautiful picture he had so enthusiastically admired.

In 1948 we were both in Warsaw after the Wroclaw congress. Picasso made a pencil drawing of me; I sat for him in a room at the old Bristol Hotel. When he had finished drawing I asked 'What, already?' Picasso laughed: 'But I've known you for forty years.' The drawing seems to me not only very like myself (or rather, I am like the drawing) but also profoundly true in its psychology. All Picasso's portraits reveal, and sometimes expose, the inner world of the sitter. A very

long time ago, when I told Picasso how much I loved the Impressionists, he said: 'They set out to show the world as they saw it. That does not interest me. I want to show the world as I think it.'

Of course, many of Picasso's works are difficult to understand: complexity of thoughts and feelings, unusual forms. I had to act as interpreter at Picasso's first meeting with Alexander Fadeyev at Wroclaw.

FADEYEV. I can't understand some of your works; I'd rather tell you so straight out. Why do you sometimes choose a form which people can't understand?

PICASSO. Tell me, Comrade Fadeyev, did they teach you reading at school?

FADEYEV. Of course.

PICASSO. How did they teach you?

FADEYEV. (with his high, piercing laugh). C-a-t, cat.

PICASSO. That's how they taught me, too. C-a-t, cat. Very well, and did they teach you how to understand art?

Fadeyev laughed again and changed the conversation.

If one considers Picasso's work as a whole, it becomes clear that he changed the nature of art. After the Impressionists, people began to see nature afresh, not through the spectacles of the Bolognese school. Artists painted only from life: portraits, landscapes, still-lives. Compositions became the monopoly of academic artists. What painters feared above all was subject painting, 'literary stuff,' as they called it. I suppose the last composition painted by a great artist in France was Courbet's *L'enterrement à Ornans*; the date of this work is 1850. In 1937, almost a hundred years later, Picasso painted *Guernica*.

Arriving in Paris from Madrid I went at once to the Spanish pavilion at the World Fair and was dumbfounded: I saw *Guernica*. I have seen it twice since—at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1946 and at the Picasso retrospective exhibition at the Louvre in 1956—and on both occasions I felt the same excitement. How is it that Picasso was able to see ahead? After all, the Spanish Civil War was waged in the old way. True, it served as an exercise for the *Luftwaffe* but the raid on Guernica was only a minor operation, a try-out. Then came the Second World War. Then came Hiroshima. Picasso's painting is the horror of what was still to come: a host of *Guernicas*, the atomic catastrophe. What we see are the fragments of a shattered world, madness, hatred, despair and non-being.

(What is realism? And is that painter a realist who tries to represent

the tragedy of Hiroshima by carefully drawing the ulcers on the body of one or ten of the victims? Does not reality demand a different, more generalised approach which reveals, not an individual incident, but the essence of the tragedy?)

Picasso's strength lies in the fact that he can express the most profound thought, the most complex feeling in the language of art. Even as an adolescent he painted like an old master; his lines convey whatever he wants them to convey, they are under his power; he is dedicated to art, and he can grow furious or bitterly unhappy if he does not immediately find the exact colour he needs.

There was a time when painting like huge coloured photographs was cultivated in our country. I remember a funny conversation which took place at that time between Picasso and a young Leningrad painter.

PICASSO. Do they sell paints here?

PAINTER. Of course, any amount.

PICASSO. In what form?

PAINTER. (bewildered) In tubes.

PICASSO. What does it say on the tubes?

PAINTER (still more bewildered). Why, the colour of the paint: ochre, burnt sienna, ultramarine, blue, chrome yellow.

PICASSO. You ought to rationalise the production of paint. At your factories they should manufacture mixed colours and label the tubes 'for the face', 'for hair', 'for military uniforms'. That would be much more practical.

Some authors who have written about Picasso have tried to represent his interest in politics as something accidental, a whim: he is an eccentric, he likes bullfighting, and for some reason he has become a Communist. Picasso has always treated his political choice very seriously. I remember a dinner at his studio on the day the Paris Peace Congress opened. That day a daughter was born to Picasso, whom he called Paloma, 'dove'. There were three of us at the table: Picasso, Paul Eluard and I. At first we talked about pigeons. Pablo told us how his father, a painter, who often drew pigeons, would allow him as a boy to draw the pigeons' feet, of which he himself had grown tired. Then we spoke about pigeons and doves in general. Picasso likes them and always keeps some; laughing, he said that pigeons were greedy and cantankerous birds; he could not understand why they had been made into a symbol of peace. Then he turned to his peace doves and showed us a hundred drawings for the congress poster—he knew that

his dove was destined to fly over the whole world. He talked about the congress, about war and politics. I remember one sentence: 'Communism for me is intimately bound up with my whole life as an artist.' The enemies of Communism do not give this bond any thought: sometimes it puzzles certain Communists.

Later, Picasso drew several more doves for the Warsaw and Vienna Congresses. Hundreds of millions of people know and love Picasso only through the doves. The snobs sneer at those people. Picasso's detractors accuse him of having sought an easy success. Yet the peace doves are closely connected with all the rest of his work, the minotaurs and the goats, the old men and the girls. Of course his dove is only a single particle in the wealth of his creation. But how many people knew and admired Raphael through the reproduction of a single picture, the Sistine Madonna? How many millions know and admire Chopin only because he composed a piece of music they hear at funerals? The snobs do wrong to laugh. Of course it is impossible to know Picasso by the dove alone, but one has to be a Picasso to make such a dove.

Picasso himself, far from being offended by the love of simple people for his peace dove and for him, is infinitely touched by it. In 1949 the World Peace Committee met in Rome. After an open-air meeting held in a large square we walked along a street in a working-class district; some passers-by recognized him, took him to a small *trattoria*, gave him wine and embraced him; women asked him to hold their babies for a few minutes. It was an expression of the kind of love that cannot be simulated. Of course those people had not seen Picasso's paintings, and would not have understood many of them had they seen them; but they knew that he, a great artist, was for them and with them, and that is why they embraced him.

At the congresses—in Wroclaw, in Paris—he always sat with his earphones on, listening attentively. Several times I was obliged to ask him for favours: it nearly always turned out at the last moment that a Picasso drawing would be essential for the success of a congress or of some local peace campaign. And, however busy he was with other work, he always complied.

From time to time people on the same side as himself politically would condemn or reject his works. He received this with a certain bitterness but calmly, saying 'there are always quarrels within a family'.

He knew that his pictures adorn many American museums, and he knew, too, that when he wanted to go to the United States with a World Peace Council delegation he was refused a visa. But he also knew something else: in the country he loved and believed in there was a negative attitude to his work for a long time. When we met once he said, laughing: 'You and I are in trouble again.' Shortly beforehand I had written an article in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, not, of course, on art but on the struggle for peace (this was in 1949); in it I said that the best minds in the West were with us, and mentioned Picasso among others. The editorial board printed a footnote expressing regret that I had failed to criticise the formalist elements in Picasso's work. Naturally the anti-Soviet press in France quoted, not my article, but the footnote. Pablo only laughed, saying that it was not worth while getting upset: Rome wasn't built in a day.

Nothing could shake his confidence in the Soviet Union. In 1956 some of his friends, a prey to doubts, appealed to him to sign various protests, declarations and statements. Picasso refused.

His exhibition in Moscow was a great joy for me. Too many people came to the opening: the organisers, afraid that there would be too few, had sent out too many invitations. The crowd broke the barriers. Everyone was afraid they might not get in. The director of the museum, white in the face, came running to me: 'Try to calm them, I'm afraid there'll be a stampede.' I said into a microphone: 'Comrades, you have waited twenty-five years for this exhibition, you can wait quietly for another twenty-five minutes.' Three thousand people laughed and order was restored. I was supposed to open the exhibition on behalf of the 'Friends of French Culture'. Normally these ceremonies strike me as boring or ludicrous, but on that day I was as excited as a schoolboy. They gave me a pair of scissors and I felt as though I were about to sunder, not a ribbon, but a curtain behind which stood Pablo.

Naturally enough, people at the exhibition argued. That is always the way at Picasso exhibitions: he delights, outrages, amuses, gives pleasure; no one is left indifferent.

'Contradictions'? Very well, so be it. 'The work of Picasso shows a multitude of contradictions.' But let us remember some dates. His first works were exhibited in 1901, and now, as I write these lines, it is 1960. Have we not seen a few contradictions in the course of those sixty years? Picasso has expressed the complexity, bewilderment, despair and hope of his epoch. He destroys and builds, loves and hates.

How lucky I have been, when all is said and done. During my life I have met some people who have shaped the face of the century. I count that far-off spring day on which I met Picasso among the great moments of my life.

I have told little of him, and that little in a confused fashion. If I ever come to write the next sections of this book, I shall doubtless return to him again. But here I have tried to express what moved me in pre-revolutionary times, both when I met Picasso and when I looked at his paintings. It is a landmark in my life.

## 29

IT HAPPENED in the morning. I was sitting, as always, in the empty Rotonde and struggling with the translation of a Du Bellay sonnet in which he appeals to his country from Rome: '*France, France, respons à ma triste querelle . . . Si ne suis-je pourtant le pire du troupeau.*'

Fotinsky, wildly excited—I had not noticed him enter the café—grabbed me by the arm.

(The painter Serge Fotinsky had come to Paris long before me. Like all the rest he starved and, like all the rest, he painted landscapes and had a devout faith in art. He married a Frenchwoman, but always said 'at home, in Russia'; he obtained a Soviet passport. He is a very kindly, very enthusiastic man. In 1936 he decided to go to Moscow for a fortnight. He stayed two years, observing everything with rapture mixed with fright. In 1941 the Germans put him in a camp at Compiègne; it was only by chance that he was not killed. He has lived in Paris for sixty years, but he still says 'at home, in the Soviet Union'. His Russian is peculiar: 'Are you taking the *avion*?' His way of crossing a street is more peculiar still: he raises an arm, as though to warn the drivers that the machine must respect the man. As he does this he looks like Moses dividing the sea.)

'What, don't you know?' he shouted. 'The Tsar's gone!'

I did not know what he was talking about, but was delighted and embraced Fotinsky. On the front page of the newspaper it said: '*Coup d'état* in Petrograd. Nicholas II has abdicated in favour of his brother Michael.' 'What of it?' I said to Fotinsky. 'In what way is Michael better than Nicholas?' But it is difficult to disillusion Fotinsky. He ran off to fetch another paper and we found a small item: 'Strikes and demonstrations in Petrograd.' 'It's a real revolution!' cried Fotinsky. I embraced him again.

The habitués started appearing one by one; they congratulated us and argued whether the new Tsar would stay in power or whether there would be a republic. (We did not know that the French censorship was holding back cables from Russia and that no one in Petrograd gave Michael a thought, whilst the Soviet of Workers' Deputies was

discussing what to do about the Provisional Government.) Libion said at first that the Russians always liked to do things at the wrong time—it was enough to look at Ehrenburg; but, seeing that we were happy, he brought out a bottle of sparkling Vouvray and drank with us to the republic.

It was difficult to understand what was going on in Russia. *Le Temps*, the most respectable of all the papers, wrote that some women had rioted because of delays in the delivery of foodstuffs, that the delays were caused by heavy snowfalls, that Nicholas had been consorting with pro-German circles and that Michael favoured the Allies. Since General Khabalov had announced that large supplies of flour would be delivered to Petrograd, the riots could be considered at an end.

Two or three days later Lapinski and I went to the Russian embassy. It was the first time I had been inside the old building in the rue de Grenelle. The gate was open and the courtyard was crowded with excited émigrés. They were shouting, congratulating each other and singing. I was told that the Tsarist ambassador Izvolsky had received a delegation and had promised to help all political émigrés to return to Russia; he had issued a warning, however, that the matter was complicated: the Germans had intensified their submarine warfare; convoys would have to be escorted by British destroyers; the British did not like to hurry. The crowd refused to disperse. For some reason everybody was anxious to see Sevastopulo, the embassy counsellor; he kept saying: 'Gentlemen, please, try to put yourselves in our place.'

I saw a portrait of the Tsar lying on the floor in a corridor: they had just had time to remove it. I must repeat that everything has a far stronger effect the first time it happens than on subsequent occasions. I was four years old when Nicholas II ascended the throne; I knew that his father 'rested in God' whereas he was 'mercifully in good health'; I knew that in Germany there was Wilhelm with the moustache, in Austro-Hungary old Franz-Josef and, in England, George V who looked like our Nicholas. And now, suddenly, there was Nicholas' portrait on the floor of the Tsarist embassy. Whilst I, Ilya Grigoryevich Ehrenburg, charged under Article 102, was standing there with my comrades and singing 'We have engaged in fateful struggle with the foe.' And His Excellency was looking at us beseechingly. This was extraordinary, and I said to Sevastopulo severely:

'You must send us all to Russia at once.' The counsellor nodded and again asked everyone to be calm.

'You'll go and never come back,' said Chantal. We walked for hours in the dark, empty streets. There was a drizzle of warm spring rain.

Soon we heard that we should be sent off in batches; the first to go would be émigrés belonging to the more important political parties. I shouldn't get out before the summer. I returned to Paris life, going to the Rotonde, arguing about art with Diego, translating my poems for Max Jacob. But all the time I thought of Russia. Try as I would, I could not visualise what was going on there. I knew that the papers were lying. Before my eyes there rose pictures of old, sleepy Moscow: front gardens full of lilac, evenings at Tanya's, meetings, all-night cafés.

I went to a gathering of émigrés, thinking that there, too, they would all be congratulating one another; but everyone was at daggers drawn. The Socialist Revolutionary Chernov was saying eloquently: 'We must defend Socialism and Russia.' His manner irritated me, but I applauded him. Antonov-Ovseyenko, heated as always, made a confused speech, repeating that the main thing was to put an end to the war. I applauded him too. I realised that I had dropped out of political life and it was difficult to get things straight: at first glance everyone seemed right. I did not attend the next meeting.

Then there was a fête organized in honour of the Russian Revolution by the League for the Rights of Man. The vast hall was crammed. The historian Aulard made a speech saying that the Russian Revolution was a social one and that now was the time to overthrow the Kaiser. Some people shouted 'Down with the War!' Séverine also spoke; I knew her through some articles, written a little sentimentally but sincerely; she had been the friend and was the executrix of Jules Vallès. She spoke of the heroism of Russian women, of the wives of the Decembrists, of Vera Zasulich, Figner and the working women of Petrograd. I started clapping; Grisha, sitting not far from me, whistled. Some began to sing the *Marseillaise*, others the *Internationale*. The fête ended in blows.

The papers were full of gushing articles about America: the first American troops were expected to land at Le Havre any day. They extolled everything—President Wilson and Lillian Gish, American tinned food and the dollar. It was a honeymoon. By contrast, the

papers referred to Russia as to an old and faithless wife. The Soviet of Workers' Deputies made them particularly angry; they invented stories about Chkheidze—he was their first target. Chkheidze was represented as a fanatic prepared to hand France over to the Kaiser. The French were incapable of pronouncing his name; Libion, greatly worried, kept asking me whether I knew this 'Chibizze' and whether it was true that he hated the French nation. (Chkheidze emigrated to Paris in 1921. I do not know how the French received him, but a few years later he committed suicide.) The pace-maker in the anti-Russian campaign was *Le Matin*; by April it was publishing little articles which set out to prove that the Russians had always adored the Prussians, that they were irresponsible and inclined to betray their friends.

A particularly harsh fate befell the Russian brigades which the Tsarist government had sent to France in 1916. The Russian soldiers' lot had been a tragic one from the start. General Lokhvitsky and his officers were in the habit of flogging any 'other ranks' who committed the slightest offence. The French found this out and began treating the Russians with pity and contempt. When Russian troops arrived in a village for a rest, the town crier, on the orders of the Russian command, announced to the accompaniment of a drum that it was strictly forbidden to sell grape wine to Russian soldiers. In France wine is given to children. The peasants were afraid to look out of their windows: the newcomers who could not be given wine must be savages, drunk before they had had a drink.

The first mutiny of Russian soldiers took place in June 1916. They killed an officer known for his outstanding cruelty. Nine 'ringleaders' were shot.

For a year the Russians and the French weighed each other up. I kept a note of some comments by Russian soldiers on the French, both critical and favourable.

'They say "*camarade*". But what kind of comrades are they? They don't know what it means. Here, everyone's out for himself.'

'They say we're dirty, but just look at them! They've got pomade on their hair, but you can bet it's a year since any one of them has been to the bath-house. They don't wash their dirt off, they drive it in.'

'A courteous people. You go into a shop and it's *monsieur* and *merci*.'

'With us, they knock you about as soon as look at you. But I've seen one of them standing there, reporting to a general just as if he was talking to his mate. I've seen a French soldier sitting in a café; a colonel came in and he didn't bat an eye.'

'Call this an *iqba*? Why, it isn't every gentleman at home that lives like this.'

I remember a comical argument in which the Russians came out on top. The French do not eat buckwheat porridge (during the last war our cooks tried giving it to the *Normandie* airmen, but they wouldn't touch it. And so the Frenchmen started jeering at the Russian soldiers: 'You know, we feed cattle on that stuff.' The Russians kept their end up: 'What about you? You eat snails and frogs. Our cattle at home wouldn't look at that.'

However, until the summer of 1917 relations between the Russian soldiers and the population were peaceful.

In April 1917 the French command attempted to carry out an offensive in the area of Rheims. Two Russian brigades took part in the fighting. Shortly beforehand General Nivelle received some foreign journalists; after praising the fighting spirit of the French he turned to me and said with unconcealed irony: 'I hope that the air of France has immunised your fellow-countrymen against the bleating of demagogues.' The Russian brigades fought well and occupied a position on which the fate of Rheims depended; but support from other units was not forthcoming and they were obliged to withdraw. Losses were heavy.

On 1st May the Russian troops were resting. A big meeting was held. The band played the *Marseillaise*, then the *Internationale*. The peasants were amazed; one of them said to me: 'I can understand them mutinying, everyone's sick of the war, our fellows are mutinying too. But why are there officers among them? And why do they sing the *Marseillaise*? What a funny lot you are!'

The Russian soldiers demanded only one thing: to be sent back to Russia. The tragedy took place later. Just before my departure I learned that the Russian brigades were being held at the La Courtine camp as prisoners of war; the intention was to send them to Africa.

I suddenly received an invitation from the British command to visit an Anzac sector. It turned out that, under the law, Australian soldiers were required to take part in parliamentary elections; ballot boxes

were brought up to the front line. The commanding officer explained to me that it would doubtless be of value for a Russian to study the technique of front-line voting.

Various people began to take an interest in me, not, of course, as the author of *Poems about the Eves* but as the correspondent of a Petrograd newspaper. Marx's grandson, the Socialist Jean Longuet, talked to me at great length about the conflict between anti-imperialism and the need to save France; then he suddenly laughed ruefully and said: 'I can't remember who it was, Nietzsche I think, who said that it is foolish to lecture an earthquake.' At a foreign press luncheon the Minister of War, Painlevé, spoke to me of his love for Tolstoy, Chekhov and Gorky. He had good, intelligent eyes. He was a gifted mathematician; I do not know what made him choose a statesman's career.

At the *Maison de la Presse* they told me with great indignation that Senegalese soldiers at Saint-Raphäel were mutinying and demanding 'soviets' for the soldiers. It soon turned out that what the Senegalese wanted was some leave; but the newspapers insisted that the Russians were trying to 'undermine the morale of our brave colonial troops'.

A wave of strikes began in Paris. The first to come out were the *mininettes*—dressmakers, seamstresses and milliners. Young girls marched down the streets singing a cheeky little tune with an entirely harmless content: they wanted the 'English week', i.e. a half-day on Saturdays, and more pay. Soldiers on leave joined the demonstrations: they liked the girls and, at the same time, they took the opportunity to acquaint the Parisians with a different and more serious tune: 'Down with the war!'

Soldiers began to mutiny. A man on leave came to the Rotonde and told us that his friend, a young sculptor, had been shot.

I was given a bundle of German newspapers. The Germans expressed admiration for the Russian revolution and hailed the French soldiers who protested against the criminal war. In Germany itself, however, there was no shouting of any kind. German divisions continued to occupy Champagne, Artois and Picardy.

Everything was in a state of restlessness and confusion. I remember only one gay event. Diaghilev put on the ballet *Parade*. Erik Satie wrote the music, Picasso designed the décor and the costumes. It was a very original ballet: a booth at a fair with acrobats, jugglers, conjurors and a performing horse. The ballet represented the lifeless

automatisation of movements; it was the first satire on what later came to be called 'Americanism'. The music was modern and the décor semi-Cubist. Pablo gave me an invitation for the first night. The audience were exquisite, *le tout-Paris* as the French say, i.e. rich people who wish to be counted among the connoisseurs of the arts. The music, the dancing and especially the décor infuriated them. Before the war I had once been to a Diaghilev ballet which provoked an outcry, Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*. But I had never seen anything like what happened at the first night of *Parade*. People sitting in the stalls rushed towards the stage, shouting 'Curtain!' in a great frenzy. At that moment the horse with a Cubist head came on the stage and started doing circus tricks: kneeling, dancing and bowing. The audience obviously thought that the actors were making fun of their protests and, losing their heads entirely, howled 'Death to the Russians!', 'Picasso is a boche!' and 'The Russians are boches!'. The next day *Le Matin* suggested that the Russians would do better to produce, not poor choreography, but a sound offensive somewhere in Galicia.

Every day I went to one office or another: the Russian consulate, the British consulate, the French police. Getting out was not a simple matter. At last I obtained a passport issued in the name of the Provisional Government; it only remained to get the visas. It was the first time that I heard the word: before the war, no visas had existed. The day came when I found myself in possession of all three visas—British, Norwegian and French.

In two days' time I would be off. Libion believed that in all decent cities there were cafés where painters and poets spent their evenings. He stood me a glass of wonderful armagnac to mark my departure and said: 'When you're drinking vodka in the Moscow Rotonde, you'll remember old Libion.' Diego Rivera was happy for my sake: I was going to see the revolution; he had seen a revolution in Mexico, it was the gayest thing imaginable. Modigliani said: 'Perhaps we'll see each other again, perhaps not. I believe they'll put us all in prison or kill us.'

I remember my last night in Paris. I walked with Chantal along the quays of the Seine, looking about me yet seeing nothing. I was no longer in Paris and not yet in Moscow; I believe I was nowhere at all. I told her the truth: I was happy and unhappy. My life in Paris had been dreadful, and yet I loved Paris. I had come there as a mere boy,

but knowing what I must do and where I must go. Now I was twenty-six; I had learnt a great deal, but I understood nothing any more. Perhaps I had lost my way?

She tried to comfort me and said '*Au revoir*'. I felt like answering 'Farewell'.

## 30

THE FRENCH wrote slogans on the walls: 'Be careful, enemy ears are listening.' Everybody talked about vigilance. Once I went from Paris to Epernay; my pass bore five stamps from five different authorities: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of War, military H.Q., the 'Bureau of Movements in the Military zone' and the 'Aliens Control Office'. I had spent five days in five different offices; I cherished the document obtained with such effort, but no one ever asked to see it.

The English wrote nothing on their walls and my passport was stamped with only one British visa. But I discovered what vigilance really was. I have been searched many times in my life, but no one ever did it with such artistry as the English. They made me take off my shoes and carted them off somewhere; they examined all the seams of my coat and trousers; they took away my notebook, Max Jacob's poems and, after long arguments, agreed to give me back Chantal's photograph. The Englishman who did all these things had such a nice smile that it was impossible to be cross with him.

In London we were told that it was not known when we should continue on our way and from what port we should sail: it was a military secret. An Estonian called Ruddi, whom I knew from the Rotonde, was travelling with me. We set out for a walk through the big, completely strange city. Everything was far quieter than in Paris—perhaps because the war was further away, perhaps because the English do not like to get excited. London seemed to me beautiful, majestic and dreary. I thought that here Modigliani would be put in a lunatic asylum.

We spent two or three days in London. They took us to the station; our destination still remained a secret. There were many of us, political émigrés and Russian soldiers who had escaped from German prisoner of war camps. All the carriages were overcrowded. The émigrés, of course, began arguing at once; some were *oborontsy*<sup>1</sup>, others

<sup>1</sup> 'Defenders'—moderate Socialists who favoured the continuation of the War

supported Lenin. In one of the compartments they almost came to blows.

We were taken to the north of Scotland. I left the compartment to stand on the platform connecting the carriages, telling Ruddi that I wanted some fresh air. In reality I felt that I was breathing peace. Here one did not have any sense of the presence of history. Scattered cottages, hills covered with purple heather, flocks of sheep, the pink, unreal light of a northern white night. Nature can teach a man many things, but that summer I had no time for wisdom. I stood a while, breathed a while and returned to the smoke-filled carriage, where someone was shouting hoarsely: 'In what way is your Plekhanov different from Guchkov, just tell me that?'

At Aberdeen we were put on a troopship. Again there was over crowding; we sat packed together on deck. We were told that, in the event of an emergency, each of us must take his place in a lifeboat; but the number of passengers was greater than expected, and there was no place in a lifeboat for me. At night the arguments died down; we dozed sitting up, while the sea went on telling some story of its own, stormy yet unchanging. Two English destroyers cavorted round the ship. Towards morning it was announced that a U-boat had been sighted. I had been half-asleep. I looked at Ruddi and began laughing so loudly that a lady sitting next to us took offence: 'You might be a little more serious at a moment like this.' But no, one could not remain serious at the sight of Ruddi.

He was married to a nice Frenchwoman whom we used to call the 'duck-billed platypus'. His mother-in-law had been very upset: Ruddi must be mad to go to a country where everything was topsy-turvy. The North Sea crossing had alarmed her more than anything: 'You don't know the boches, they're certain to sink Ruddi's ship.' In a newspaper she had seen an advertisement for some sort of a miracle suit which would enable a man to float in the sea for an unlimited time. She had bought it for Ruddi. And now he had put it on. Could one help laughing? Almost speechless with laughter, I just managed to bring out the words: 'Do you know what you look like? Picasso's Cubist horse.' Ruddi explained that he had given his word to his mother-in-law. The lady next to us, unable to stand it any longer, moved away to the lifeboat. How could I help laughing? At that time, life frightened us more than death; and Ruddi really was inimitable.

An English sailor gave me a lifebelt and smiled at me. I smiled back but did not put the lifebelt on. It occurred to me that the water would certainly be very cold. Then I remembered that I hadn't bought any pipe tobacco in Aberdeen. The soldiers had settled down in the hold, where it was warm and cosy, even before the ship set sail. When the U-boat was sighted they were told to come up on deck, but they preferred to stay in the hold: they were playing cards and, besides, they had no faith in lifebelts.

The wooden houses of Bergen reminded me of the Moscow alleyways. But even here there was no peace: a short time previously a large fire had destroyed most of the town. Christiania seemed to me idyllic. This, surely, was the bench where Hamsun's Johann had dreamt of his Viktoria. And over there, in the ramshackle little house by the fjord, Brand had said 'All or nothing'. Stanislavsky was very good as Dr Stockmann whom everyone called 'the enemy of the people'. Why? He had chosen the truth. But what was the truth? Dr Stockmann knew that the healing springs were not healing in the least; this could easily be tested in the laboratory. But how to test an idea?

At Stockholm we were delayed for several days, waiting for some telegram or other from Petrograd. Stockholm impressed me greatly. I stood on the embankment opposite the royal palace, looking at the stone, the water and the sky, and wanted to write poetry. (I did not know that forty years later the Stockholm Appeal, frequent visits and new friends would make the city an integral part of my life.) I asked myself: am I attracted by the peacefulness of a neutral country where no one is in fear for the safety of his nearest and dearest, no one waits for air-raid warnings, where the shops are full of goods? No, this irritated rather than attracted me. What impressed me was something different: the rocks among the houses. To build a house in Stockholm is as difficult as to capture a fortress. The sea impressed me too: it comes right inside the city: the water glistens like metal, and seagulls interrupt conversations in the streets. Here there was not the gloom of London, its luxury and its Dickensian poverty, its majesty and its spleen. Here there was sadness turned into stone, deliberate and sudden like a poet's line. The people of Stockholm did not strike me as comfortable neutrals who had made a fortune out of someone else's war, but as candidates for suicide.

It turned out that Ruddi knew some Swedish painters who invited

us to a restaurant that evening. I glanced at the planned picturesqueness of the place: old barrels, brass candleholders, Cubist pictures on the walls—already Picasso had reached these northern outskirts of Europe. Girls in white caps, smiling, brought hors-d'oeuvres and vodka. I thought 'this isn't the Rotonde after all'. We said *skol!* smartly and tossed back our vodka. Then a very tall Swede with protruding eyes like a lobster's joined our table; the painters explained that he was a poet; I forget his name. He said he could speak a little French, but instead of speaking he silently drank vodka. Only towards midnight, having put away a good number of drinks, he said to me that Europe was Rome in the period of decline. The Apostle Paul had smashed the statues of Greek goddesses without considering whether they represented a cultural value. He had been right, but it was a pity about the statues. 'What do you intend to do in Russia?' he asked me. I said I did not know; perhaps they would put me in the army, perhaps I should write more poems or a novel. He said that this was a time when one could either take up a pick or a pocket handkerchief to wipe away one's tears. 'I personally like doing both things: smashing things up and weeping like an old maid over a broken vase.' His words seemed to me something I could understand; we had another drink and embraced at parting.

In the morning I remembered I was going to Russia. I should have to go and see poets whom I knew only through their books, and Petrograd and Moscow were different from the Rotonde; for one thing I had no stiff collars and I had lost my razor in the ship. Luckily I had a little money left. I bought a safety razor and a few collars.

The train ran along the Gulf of Bothnia. Tow-headed girls walked up and down along the platforms of peaceful stations with their young men. Herrings reposed on lumps of ice in the station buffets. Everything was too quiet and normal for words. It was a completely white night: the sun sank and immediately began to rise.

The journey was a long one. At length we came to the last Swedish station, Haparanda. We crossed a bridge. Here were Russian officers: we were at Tornea, the frontier station. Our welcome was far from friendly. After a glance at my passport, a lieutenant said viciously: 'Too late. Your kingdom's at an end. You're wasting your time coming here.' It was 5th July. We knew nothing of the events in Petrograd and our spirits fell. The train was now going south. Finns at the stations kept their mouths shut with the utmost concentration.

At Helsinki somebody told us that the Bolsheviks had attempted to seize power in Petrograd but had been put down. The atmosphere in my carriage reached boiling point. One of the *oborontsy* kept shouting about the 'sealed carriage' and 'treason'; then suddenly he said: 'We'll help to sort things out. What do you think you are going to do? Riot? Not a hope, my friends. Freedom is all very well, but your place is in gaol.' One of the émigrés who had joined us in London, a frail Jew who was always losing his spectacles and swallowing pills, jumped up immediately and began to shout in his turn: 'Don't you believe it! The proletariat will seize power in its hands. It remains to be seen who's going to put whom in gaol.'

My heart sank. In Paris everyone had talked of the 'bloodless revolution', of freedom and brotherhood, and here we were not yet at Petrograd and they were threatening each other with gaol. I remembered the cell at Butyrky, the slop pail, the little window. An officer, breathless with delight, was saying in Helsinki: 'The Cossacks let them have it. Well, can you suggest any other way of dealing with that lot? They're all scum. A good burst of machine-gun fire, that's the only language they understand.'

I stood in the corridor by a window. Soldiers were sprawling everywhere, women sat on the floor clasping enormous bundles. No room to turn round. I looked out of the window. How many soldiers there were! How strange they looked: exhausted, poorly clad. Everyone was swearing.

Why was everyone swearing?

One more frontier: Byelo-Ostrov. Once more they checked our documents, looked through our luggage and swore. An officer ordered me to be searched. In the pocket of my overcoat they found the collars and the razor; the officer took them to another room, saying that these days collars were used for writing secret messages on. He said nothing about the razor but refused to return it. We were led to a dirty shed and told that we were to go on to Petrograd under convoy, as persons liable for military service. We should be handed over to the military authorities. All this was accompanied by swearing.

We were, indeed, put in the charge of some soldiers. The train travelled a short distance and stopped at a halt. Other soldiers took the crowded carriages by storm. Someone said that we were members of the Tsarist secret police travelling under convoy. The soldiers jeered; one of them shouted to me: 'They'll put you up against a wall,

you'll see! That's different from drinking champagne.' An officer pointed at me and said to a lady: 'You see? That's another of the "sealed carriage" lot. A good thing they grabbed him at once.'

The train moved off and stopped again almost at once near the signalman's box. A small girl was driving geese into a yard. She had a thin little pigtail with a ribbon at the end. She looked at me; I smiled, and saw her return the smile shyly. I felt easier at once.

A woman in the corridor was screaming at the top of her voice: someone had stolen a sack of sugar from her. 'They ought to shoot the lot,' said a dapper old man in a linen jacket. I did not try to guess whom he meant: the thieves or the black marketeers; I was suddenly overjoyed: everyone round me spoke Russian.

Factory chimneys. A plot of waste ground with trampled grass and yellow flowers, just like Shabolovka. Smoke-blackened houses. I was home.

1960

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